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Prologue

Spottedleaf stared out across the glade, nostalgia overlapping her as her starry companion trotted over to her.
"Pretty night out, wouldn't you say?" the tom mewed, weaving around her, their tails entwined affectionately.
"Honestly Thrushpelt. Every night is pretty in Starclan. I haven't been here for a day, I've noticed that there are no bad nights." I scoffed.
"Oh Spottedleaf, you really do overanalyze everything." He mewed, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"So, what are you doing at the sight stone?" He asked, ears pricked in curiosity.
Spottedleaf wriggled uncomfortably at the verbal intrusion.
"Um Nothing. Just watching the clan" She meow.
"Really?" He mewed, tilting his head "any cat in particular?"
"N-no" Spottedleaf stammers, caught off guard by the verbal intrusion. "Why would I be?" She mews defensively.
He chuckled at her insecurity,
"It's not wrong to watch over certain cats that you had a special attachment to. After all, I still watch over Bluestar, but that doesn't mean I dont love you" he stated firmly, before coiling around her, brushing her fur with his.
"So" he started again "you gonna tell me what you're looking at?"
Spottedleaf shifted her weight and got up.
"I was just watching how Fireheart was getting on, and it seems that he's been better than I though he'd be. Graystripe is making sure of that." She chuckles the last part half to herself.
"Well now that wasn't so hard was it?" He snickered like a kit.
"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got an honorable Shadowclan elder to welcome to Starclan" he sighed and left her to her thoughts. *Well goodbye Fireheart.* She thinks to herself, leaving the sightstone to go and find Thrushpelt and this new Shadowclan elder.

Chapter 1

A/N 1: *Recommended that you read the first arc of WARRIORS - ERIN HUNTER, before reading this;*

A/N 2: *This story's preceding chronology does not align with the story canon.*

The weather was abjectly miserable. Icy darts of drizzle cascaded down the rocky walls, carried by bone-chilling gusts of wind that bore down into the ravine.
"Brrr. Why do we have to go train *now*? It's so cold out." Cinderpaw complained.
Fireheart chuckled at that. "Cinderpaw, if we were to pause your training every time it got cold, you would be an apprentice till you became an elder." Cinderpaw rolled her eyes and yawned,
"Okay, okay, fine" she mewed through the yawn.
"Good. Now then, where's Gray-" Fireheart caught himself, knowing that there was no point in calling for Graystripe. He sighed in conceded irritation.
"Brackenpaw!" He called out instead
"Yes fireheart?" He came stumbling hurriedly over rocks scattered over the camp.
"Come. I'm taking you two out for training." Fireheart mewed, and quickly turned to exit the camp, not allowing himself to take the frustration out on the apprentice. It was not his fault that his mentor would rather moon over a Riverclan she-cat.
"Come along you two. We can practice some battle training, seeing as you two are so unmotivated to hunt." Fireheart remarked, making a turn for the training hollow.
"Yay!" Cinderpaw cheered and hurriedly took the lead. Funny kit.

"Come on Brackenpaw, you have to dive *under* her when she swipes, Not around. It leaves you way too open to attack. And there's no point in swiping if you're just gonna graze her fur."
Fireheart yelled from the other side of the hollow, watching the

brawling apprentices with a vicarious battle rush. They were fast learners, but Cinderpaw was way too distracted by the smallest things. Brackenpaw is smaller than average, but he made up for it with his speed.
However, this would be a lot easier if Graystripe would actually *train* his apprentice, instead of leaving him to whatever fate might have planned. He was just lucky that he had Fireheart to cover for him. Why he felt so obligated to assist him in deliberately defying the warrior code was beyond him. Fireheart just wished that he would come to his senses, because one day he would get caught, and the repercussions would be severe.
"Alright, that's enough training for today" He called over to the apprentices. "I'm going to go check the border. You two head back to camp. Don't misbehave and don't get distracted on your way." they nodded agreement and scampered off.
Now. Time to go and see about a mouse-brain. Fireheart was pretty sure that he could guess where he'd find Graystripe.

As Fireheart neared the Riverclan border, he could hear hushed chatter, and pushing through a bramble bush, spotting a noisy heap of light and dark gray fur intertwined in its self. Upon close inspection, he was able to identify the fur patterns of his best friend Graystripe, and Silverstream. The two were chittering away like songbirds, laying together cooing at each other, not a care in the world. It hurt his eyes to see such blatant disloyalty. A gutting sensation wormed uneasily within him at seeing Graystripe with that fish-breath. He sighed, turned tail and stomped off back to camp, fuming.

Fireheart ducked, entering through the gorse tunnel entrance.
StarClan please just let me sleep this off. Fireheart pleads silently.
"Ah there you are, Fireheart" Tigerclaw, Bluestar's deputy approached. *I guess we have different definitions of sleep.* Fireheart flattened his ears in distaste. *This ought to be good.*
"I want you to lead a patrol along the Riverclan border" there was a glint in his eye at the mention of Riverclan.
"Tigerclaw, I was just there, actually." He tried. The deputy glared at him briefly before shaking out his fur.
"Did you, per chance, mark the border while you were there?" He questioned, staring at the fiery warrior from the corner of his eye.

His paws shifted uneasily.
"...No. okay, I'll go." He conceded. The RiverClan border was marked the day before, so it shouldn't need marking today, but Fireheart could see that this was not an argument worth having, nor one that he'd win if he had it. The uneasiness returned all the same, though. This patrol came out of nowhere. *At least, I think it did.* He eyed the deputy for moment, testing his eyes it for any information they might give away, but averted his own gaze so as to not give the tabby a similar opportunity.
Did he see something? Had he been tipped off that a Thunderclan warrior had been spending a little too much time at the border? He resigned himself.
Well even a mouse-brain would realize that Graystripe is hardly ever at camp anymore. And it was likely that every cat had noticed that Fireheart had been taking Brackenpaw out for training the past half moon. He returned his gaze to the deputy with a friendly nod.
"Sure. Who will be joining me?" Fireheart asked, keeping the hesitance from his voice.
"I'd like you to take Longtail and Darkstripe." He mewed passively.
"O-okay. No problem" Fireheart responded in a more hushed tone.
Longtail and Darkstripe? What is Tigerclaw trying to pull here?
*"*Come on Fireheart. No time to sit around like crowfood." Darkstripe mewed, nudging him toward the gorse tunnel.

They arrived at the outskirts of the border by sun high, and Longtail was somewhat pushing through the patrol, while darkstripe was ducking into bushes and behind trees, searching for... something.
"What are you looking for?" Meowed fireheart, worried for the answer.
"None of your business kittypet" he lashed out, coming nose to nose with me.
"Actually it is. I'm patrol leader, and I want to know what you are patrolling for. Tell me or I'm sending you back to camp." He hissed, raising his voice. Patience for Darkstripe was one thing he did not have. He was the only cat other than Tigerclaw that he could truly say he hated in his clan. Darkstripe arched his back threateningly.
"Kittypet got claws. Do you *want* to use our claws? If that's the case, I'm happy to oblige." He hissed.
"I've wanted to for a *long* time, snakebreath," retorted Fireheart, unsheathing his claws.

"Alright, break it up. None of us want to have to explain to this to Bluestar. Lets just finish the patrol" meowed Longtail almost pleadingly, and then stared hard, almost warningly at Darkstripe for another second before turning to carry on walking.

They arrived at the stop that fireheart was dreading. It still smelled faintly of Graystripe. As they padded along, he noticed Darkstripe grin slightly from the corner of his eye, trying to slink away quietly.
"Where are you going?" Fireheart called over to him.
"Just to go mark down by the river. That's all" he called back in a hasty tone, picking up his pace.
"Well then let's all go together" suggested Fireheart, trotting down with him.
"That won't be-"Darkstripe tried to interject but was cut off by fireheart.
"Nonsense. C'mon Lets go" meowed fireheart quickly and brushed past him down to the river, preparing to fake-yowl in shock at Graystripe sharing tongues with silverstream. He wasn't going down with him just because Graystripe wanted an inter-clan mate.
Holding his breath, fireheart pushed past the brush.
Nothing.
The river was void of any animal activity.
Good. He must've heard us coming.
Darkstripe looked around, intent on finding something. It was pretty obvious to fireheart at this point that Tigerclaw got whiff of Graystripe's affair with Silverstream and decided to try and catch him in the act, and knowing Tigerclaw, probably hoping that Graystripe would rat him out with him to try and ease the heat, that way it'd be a much smaller leap to getting him out of the clan. Sounds just like something that a snake like Tigerclaw would do.

They finished the patrol swiftly after the river search. Suppose Darkstripe and Longtail realized that they weren't gonna get anything on Graystripe.

It was sundown by the time they reached the ravine.
As soon as they entered the the gorse tunnel, Darkstripe headed straight to Tigerclaw. Fireheart couldn't hear them, but Tigerclaw's face said it all. He looked like someone kicked dirt over his prey. Fireheart took a sidelong glance over to the warriors den, and there

was Graystripe staring at me anxiously.
Yeah. Fireheart thought to himself. *Graystripe, you're lucky that we didn't get there sooner. There would've been nothing that I could've done for you then.*
Well, he could've attacked silverstream let Graystripe try to play it off as a border skirmish, but Graystripe would not have thanked him for it.

The sun was now setting on the horizon, and the shadows spread through the camp like water, filling it out with darkness, until the moon comes out at least.
So, he headed back to the warriors den to catch up on some well earned sleep, not even sparing Graystripe a glance.

So that's it. Thank you for getting this far :) Anyways, have a nice day you beautiful people

Chapter 2

Fireheart padded through the forest, annoyance painfully prevalent in his chest. He was feeling incredibly irritated, and was heading to the Riverclan border, where he knew a certain silver queen would be waiting.
Pushing through the brambles, he could make out immediately, Silverstream's pelt.
Hissing, he skidded down the slope.
"Looking for someone?" He sneered, allowing his irritation a target just this once.
"I have no idea what you're talking about, I'm simply-" Fireheart cut her off "Graystripe isn't coming" he interjected.
The queen froze up, a dumb look plastered to her face. "W-what are you talking about" she stammered.
"Silverstream, don't play fox. I know you've been seeing each other. No, don't respond" he cut her off before she could stack a retort, "against my better judgement - and the warrior code - I've covered for you two, but this ends today. You two *need* to stop this. Cats are starting to notice," Fireheart mewed, quelling his anger before it took over, and allowing himself to have a two way talk.
"Listen Warrior. Fireheart was it? I don't have to explain myself to you!" She hissed, her voice growing into a snarl.
Fireheart padded forward, "look Silverstream"- he said, still creeping toward the fuming she-cat-" I have no intention of giving you away to Crookedstar. All I ask is that you stop seeing him, because.. I can't bear to see the furball get in trouble. If you really loved him, you'd want the same. " He ended. The last part came as a whisper. He had no idea where that came from.
Silverstream stared at him for a second, as if analyzing him, before something changed. Now they shone with a new light, but Fireheart wasn't sure what it was. It looked like... pity? Did she *pity* him? How in StarClan *dare* she?! But before he could verbally jab at her, she cut in.
"Look Fireheart. Even if I wanted to break it off, I can't. You see, I'm expecting his kits."
At those words, colour drained from the world and Fireheart's heart

fell screaming and flailing into the pit of his chest. That was the only explanation for the pulse that just passed through his pelt.
"W-what?" He choked, taking a shaky step back, but not ready to plant his left forepaw back onto the ground.
"I'm sorry Fireheart. There's nothing I can do about it" she mewed.
Fireheart felt dizzy. He lost track of the queen. All he could see was the ground. *Would the world please stop spinning for a moment?* He turned around to hide his face. He knew that there was no possibility of disguising pain he felt. Like a delicate leaf catching the morning dew, his heart was threatening to spill over.
He darted in *a* direction, not once looking back, but slowed once he was confident that he was out of the she-cat's earshot. He shook his head,
"Why do I even care!?" He screamed, digging his claws into the soft earth, and and resentment toward Graystripe swelling like nothing he'd ever felt. He pinched his eyes shut to relieve the tension in his face.
"Graystripe you idiot!" He muttered angrily to himself, teeth clenched.
Just then, realization hit Fireheart like a monster, his grieving running to a halt. He was really ticked off with that furball. Turning abruptly, he stomped back into Thunderclan territory to confront Graystripe.
The camp was buzzing with life, kits playing with moss, Yellowfang treating Runningwind's paw, Tigerclaw sorting the midday patrol.

"Graystripe!" He snarled over the clearing. A head popped out from behind the nursery, a bramble twig in his mouth. A couple cats turn their heads their heads to Graystripe, their gazes portraying confusion, some with looks of pity, and then back at Fireheart.
"Now what has he done?" Runningwind whispered to Fireheart, but he payed no attention, only grabbed graystripe's ear with his thorn-like claws once gray warrior reached him, and dragged him out of camp, Graystripe stumbling and struggling behind.

Fireheart dragged him down to the training hollow and let go of his ear.
"Oww. What is wrong with you?" He whined.
"What's wrong with me!?" He retorted, his face contorted in anger.
"Graystripe I cant believe you!" He continued. "You... you- you...

With Silverstream!"
Graystripe tilted his head. "So *now* you're so angry about that? You're a bit late to the hunt there" He retorted.
Fireheart stepped forward furiously, rounding on the warrior. "Silverstream's expecting kits." He blurted out. Graystripes stilled, the white of his eyes showing.
Fireheart averted his eyes for a moment out of anger, noticing water pattering to the ground, battering his friend's fur. *When did it start raining?*
"I-I-" Graystripe stumbled over his words, but fireheart interrupted him, his voice raised in panic.
"Do you understand how the clan will feel? Do you even *care* how I f-" Fireheart choked on his words, realizing exactly what he was feeling. Resentment, and pain. But the strongest, a feeling so strong that he could almost taste it. Betrayal. Tears began sneaking their down his face despite his best own efforts almost, mostly disguised by the rain. Graystripe stared on, his gaze fixed on Fireheart. The flame-colored tom was staring at the ground, vision blurred, not sure if it was the rain or his own tears, his claws sheathing and unsheathing out into the ground, clenching his teeth to suppress his hurt as much as he could. Suddenly though, he felt the warmth of a pelt pressed against his own. He looked up, hoping to see Graystripe pressed against him, reassuring him that everything was okay, but was disappointed at seeing the white pelt of the senior warrior Whitestorm. At that point though, Fireheart didn't care. Fireheart just let the Whitstorm guide him back to camp, Graystripe not far behind, and the rain still bucketing down, drowning out any sounds made by the warriors. Graystripe didn't even have words to offer. It hurt so much.

The trek back to camp allowed Fireheart to clear his thoughts and compose himself slightly. Though the downpour didn't stop, neither the sky nor his own, he could speak without blubbering.

When they pushed through the gorse entrance, Fireheart headed straight for the corner of the clearing. He refused to sleep in the same den as Graystripe that night. He'd rather sleep outside in the rain. He crouched down, rain and mud baking his belly fur and he winced, immediately beginning to shiver and squirm uncomfortably. Just as he was reconsidering his decision, he felt a

tail brush against his ear. He looked up to see Goldenflower. She was ushering him toward the nursery, a sympathetic look in her eyes. He wouldn't think twice about the offer.

As he pushed through the entrance of the nursery, he was greeted with the sweet milky scent that was forever wafting through this den.
"Fireheart. What were you doing out there laying in the rain? You know you'll catch a cold."
Goldenflower scolded, the other three queens looking on. Frostfur was staring sharply at Fireheart until her face softened. *Well I suppose the rain doesn't hide my distress-scent as well as I'd hoped*. He thought to himself
"What's wrong. Did something happen?" She pressed.
Fireheart didn't want to talk about Graystripe right now, so he dodged the question, hoping they just accept it.
"would it... be alright if I slept here tonight? Otherwise I can just go back outside. I just... can't be in the warrior's den right now" Fireheart whimpered, curling his tail self-consciously, looking left and right.
"Well, it's not everyday a tom spends the night in the nursery. Not a grown one anyway, young as you may be." Brindleface remarked.
"I have no problem with it" Goldenflower mewed, shifting over to make space.
"Thanks" Fireheart murmured, not in the mood for causal, meaningful conversation. He lay down and went to sleep. *Too bad no kits had arrived yet.* He thought to himself. *They'd be a welcome distraction from all this*.
He let out an audible sigh, staring out into the clearing, watching the rain pattern out against the forest floor. Just as the stormy droplets began to lull him, Graystripe came padding across the clearing looking around in all directions, to which Fireheart turned his head away, screwing his eyes tightly shut and attempted to fall asleep faster, but of course, nothing ever goes according to plan. *Curses.*
"Fireheart. Are you okay?" Fireheart heard his voice at the entrance.
Fireheart sighed.
He shifted his head back toward the entrance, and opened his eyes, not bothering to lift his head, ears folded back. "I'm fine. What do you want?" Fireheart muttered resignedly, tired.

"What happened back there. Can we talk about it?" Graystripe pleaded. Fireheart stared daggers at Graystripe, fury slipping through the cracks.
"There's nothing to talk about. I don't see any problems here. I'm okay. You're *certainly* okay, we're okay, everything's all just *super duper* okay, right? *Right?*" Fireheart retorted, his half-hearted mumble turning into venomous hissing and spitting. He then turned his head with a huff to face the nursery wall, tears threatening to return.
He heard a sigh, and Graystripe's paw steps padding closer. Suddenly he felt a warm tongue caress the top of his head once, twice, thrice. Fireheart still refuse to react, but felt the fur on his shoulders involuntarily relax and fall flat. He never even realized his hackles were raised. But he was still hurt, and a couple of licks weren't going to fix that. Then he heard Graystripe padding away, back into the rain. He was gone again.
"Well, I see the issue." Brindleface commented after a moment, as though waiting for Graystripe to be out of earshot. Fireheart frowned harder at that it was that obvious, trying to pretend he didn't hear that.
"Fireheart, coming from a queen who's spent over four moons dealing with a mouse-brained tom, the best thing to do is talk it out." Brindleface purred.
Fireheart turned to her.
"Brindleface. What do *you* think is going on between us?" He asked, worried about how right she might be.
"Well it seems to me that Graystripe is padding after you, and not in a subtle way, but then again, subtlety has never been his strong suit. Now, he's done something characteristically stupid, as all toms do." Brindleface exclaimed, earning herself a group chuckle.
"If he is, in fact, padding after me then he isn't doing a very good job" he snorted. *He even has another mate.* What she didn't know about was the extra fishy variable in the equation.

Then her voice became more serious.
"Even if it isn't your fault, ignoring the issue won't make it go away. Sometimes you have to step up to the plate, even when you deserve better." She urged, staring at him with piercing eyes.
Fireheart sighed again, dropping his head back to the ground. "The truth is I have no idea. We've always been close. Not like mates

close, but closer than friends, and then he... does something stupid, and when I try to confront him, he acts like there was never anything. He's been giving me the cold shoulder for almost a moon now, and now I'm just supposed to come crawling back whenever *he* needs something? Certainly not. And then he just ditches me when I need him most. I refuse to be his plaything." He lamented, laying his head down, resting on his chin.
"Am I being too harsh? Cause I don't know anymore. All I know is that if the places were swapped, I'd still be here with him, regardless of how many times he tells me to eat dirt, just so he knew how much he meant to me. It just hurts that he wouldn't do the same." Fireheart opened up. At this point, nothing was sacred. He may as well be an open book. He didn't have the energy to pick and choose every detail of what he said.
Frostfur and Goldenflower were just staring at him.
"I know it's stupid. You don't need to look at me like that." He mewed, suddenly quite self-conscious again, pulling his tail in.
But the she-cats' eyes were caring, not agitative. Then Frostfur shook her head, smiling.
"Fireheart. Of course he cares about you. Maybe you can't see it, or maybe he's just really bad at showing it? But, staring from the outside in, I'm sure every queen here would agree. Even Speckletail. That was a mately display of affection - and apology, of course - if I've ever seen one." She mewed
"Right"- Brindleface spoke up -"You know he's a mouse brain, and we all know toms hate to share their feelings, out of fear of looking vulnerable. Maybe it's his pride. Or maybe he's just oblivious. But it's clear to see that he cares now." She finished.
"I think you need to give the furball a chance to make it up to you. Forgive him for the apology he's too afraid to give." Speckletail– surprisingly– spoke up, ungrudgingly. She was the oldest, and the wisest queen of all of them.
Fireheart sighed.
"Maybe you're right. Maybe he didn't mean for it to turn out like this. Can I still stay here for the night though? I'm still... not really ready to face him. Plus, it's really warm in here."
He mewed with humorous pleading.
They chuckled in chorus.
"It is, isn't it?" Goldenflower purred.
So, with a mew, he lay his head down, sleep quickly taking over.

There was so much to this story that these queens didn't know, but they were right that Fireheart needed to forgive an undeserving Graystripe and hope that the furball would make himself worthy of that forgiveness.

Chapter 3

Fireheart woke from the best sleep that he'd had in moons. He wasn't sure if that was due to the weight lifted from his chest over Graystripe or that he'd slept in the nursery.
"Wake up sleepy paws, it's almost sunhigh" he felt a muzzle nudge in his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see Goldenflower. Then her words sunk in, and he jolted awake.
"I missed morning patrol!" He panicked.
"Relax, Graystripe filled in for you. Bluestar let him. She decided that whatever was going on, you could use the sleep." Brindleface mewed soothingly.
"Oh okay... good" Fireheart's heart slowed, and he was able to recollect his calm. He stretched, brushed faces with the queen in thanks and headed out.
"Graystripe is out training Brackenpaw and Cinderpaw in case you were wondering. Has been since he got back from *morning patrol*. That thing you missed." Darkstripe growled. "You'd better tend to your warrior duties, unless"- eyed Fireheart scornfully -"you're planning of having kits yourself" he meowed scornfully. Fireheart rolled his eyes, ignoring him and pushing through the gorse tunnel, heading for the training hollow.
Of course Graystripe takes a moon off training, and nothing happens. I miss one day and every cat is on me like flees on a rogue. Fireheart hissed to himself, a prick of resentment festering in the back of his mind.

Fireheart pushed through the brambles into the training hollow, where Graystripe was instructing the apprentices. The gray warrior looked up from fixing cinderpaw's stance.
"Hey Graystripe" Fireheart greeted warmly, trotting up to him.
"Fireheart look. I'm sorry about what I -" Fireheart brushed his muzzle affectionately, cutting him off.
"What was that for?" He asked, confused.
"I forgive you" mewed Fireheart, staring him in the eyes.
"And if you're really sorry, then I have no reason to really be angry." He whispered, turning to the apprentices.

"Well, are you sure you're okay with this?" He asked. Padding toward him.
"You tell me. Should I not be?" Fireheart asked, turning back to face Graystripe.
Fireheart didn't want him to answer now. What he really wanted was to talk to Silverstream, and work things out, because her predicament really throws a badger at their life.
But now wasn't the time to be thinking about that. now was the time to be training their apprentices into warriors.

"okay!"- Fireheart turned to them, "You cannot fight if you cannot keep your balance when you get swiped at" he yowled across the the hollow, lashing a paw out lightly toward Brackenpaw, who toppled over while trying to move out of the way.
He got up quickly, fiery eyed, ready to challenge his foster mentor. Graystripe padded up next to Brackenpaw and whispered in his ear, eyeing Fireheart a couple times before moving back. Next thing the flame warrior knew, the apprentice charged at him, paws flailing.

The two warriors headed back to camp, their apprentices in tow, all carrying a piece of prey, Brackenpaw two pieces. They'd hunted before making their way back. Cinderpaw had caught a large vole, and Brackenpaw caught a pigeon mid flight and a vole. Fireheart's heart swelled with pride because, as much as Graystripe was taking his mentor duties seriously now, the fiery warrior was the one who'd trained both the apprentices the past moons.

"Graystripe, we really need to talk to Silverstream" Fireheart mewed, turning his head toward the Gray warrior. At this, Graystripe froze in his step, horror on his face.
"Fireheart what do I do? she's carrying my kits!" his voice raised above tone, and the apprentices looked up to see what was going on, and Fireheart quickly covered his muzzle with his tail in warning. The apprentices didn't deserve to have to carry around a secret like that.
"Relax. We'll figure is out" Fireheart licked his cheek soothingly, and Graystripe visibly calmed down.
"You're right. No point in panicking now. Agh! But this is just so difficult!" he grunted, visibly trying to calm down, shaking out his

fur. Good. Panic was the last thing that they needed right now.

They'd dropped off their fresh kill and their apprentices back at camp and begun heading off to the Riverclan border to meet up with Silverstream. Fireheart just hoped that this could be settled without any anguish, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of a single outcome where no cat gets hurt.

With a huff, he hauled himself over a log, almost slipping on the marshy ground when Graystripe barreled into him, sliding across the wet mud.
"Sorry" he called to the flame-colored tom, as they pushed their way through the shrubs, revealing a river on the other side.
"Silverstream!" Yowled Graystripe as they reached the river's edge.
"Graystripe thank StarClan. I thought you weren't gonna co-" the silver-pelted she-cat came into sight, but stopped in her tracks when she saw Fireheart.
"Why do I think this isn't a courtesy call?" She mewed, a crestfallen sigh escaping her maw, before she begun crossing the river. Her belly wasn't quite showing yet.
They sat down together, and everyone was now choosing their words carefully
"Silverstream. What do we do?" Graystripe started.
"Well... I don't know. Honestly I wish I had an answer." She sighed, her head dipped.
"I was excited at first because now that I was expecting your kits, the clan would have to accept us, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized how naive that was. We both know that they'd never sway for love that isn't theirs." She said.
They sat in an uncomfortable silence, no one quite knowing what to say.

Eventually after what felt like moons, a shameful idea popped into Fireheart's head.
"What if you raised the kits, and just never revealed the father. You don't have to tell anyone who's they are" he mewed. He knew it was a difficult thing to do, and a bit harsh to suggest, but it was the most practical idea that he had. He knew that she'd have every right to hate him for suggesting it. He could only imagine being in that position.

However at the mention of that, no anger sparked in her eyes, only sorrow.
"I fear that I may have to do just that." She sounded conceded. Defeated.
"I'm so sorry Silverstream, I really wish this could've gone another way, maybe if things were different."
Graystripe seemed to be trying to be as comforting as he could.
And once more, silence took over.
And they sat there, for another perceived three moons.
"Graystripe, I know that your feelings have changed. I can see it." She suddenly spoke up, breaking the silence once more.
Graystripe looked shocked. He opened his mouth to deny, but she beat him to it.
"Don't say anything. You don't have to explain yourself. I know you too well for you to hide something from me. I know better than any cat what love in your eyes looks like. I also see how Fireheart looks at you. Your heart has found a new home. One that doesn't ask you to choose between your mate and your clan." She mewed, trying to disguise her sadness. "I.. We'll decide what to do with the kits when the time comes, but for now, I need to head back to the nursery before my clanmates miss me." She turned around, tail slumped, and trotted back to the Riverclan camp.
Fireheart sighed and licked Graystripe's muzzle.
"Come. Lets go home. Before *our* clanmates miss *us*." He mewed.

The trip back to camp was a somber one, the air thick with foreboding spirits.
"It'll be alright Graystripe. Things have a way of working out. We'll find our way. We always do." Fireheart meowed, moving to step through the gorse tunnel. "I don't know Fireheart. I've never felt more lost in my entire life." He sighed.
Fireheart wanted to comfort him further, but he knew that there was nothing left to say.

Chapter 4

Woke with a shiver, Fireheart opened his eyes to the pitch black camp. The sun hadn't risen yet, and the warriors den was filled with the soft snores of his fellow warriors. Leafbare was on its way, and Thunderclan was already feeling its presence.
Graystripe lay huddled up against him, his louder-than-average snores elevated by the silence. They had managed to use teamwork to catch seven birds in a single afternoon. It was like they could read each others'minds. Fireheart stared at him, an involuntary smile appearing on his face. He couldn't help but purr at the Gray warrior, laying his head down, allowing sleep to take hold of him.

But it never came.

Sighing, he sat up, licked Graystripe's muzzle, and left the warriors den and headed out into the clearing.
Looking around, he had prepared to head out when he heard a crash of stone coming from Bluestar's den.
"Bluestar!" Fireheart yowled, rushing over to her den.
Fireheart entered the medicine den, and there lay Bluestar sprawled out, convulsing on the floor. He hurried to the entrance, seeking the medicine cat.
"Yellowfang, come quick!" He called. The flat-nosed medicine cat poked her head out from her den, rushing hurriedly across the clearing, Cinderpaw at her side. A moon back, she had been crippled by an incident with a monster, and Tigerclaw wasn't looking so innocent, but of course, no one else saw it. Now she served as a medicine cat apprentice.

The flame warrior was bending over his leader, trying to shake her awake, and as the medicine cats entered the den, as if on cue, she woke with a throaty splutter.
Staring in his direction, her eyes rolled back in agony, she hissed "Where there is light, there is darkness, and where there is darkness, there is light. Neither is good, neither is bad. When too bright shines the sun, a storm cloud must protect the delicate ground from

its burning rays. When unrelenting and dark are the rain and clouds, the sun shall rise to quell the deadly flood... evil exists only when divorced from balance. Bring balance to light and dark." Her scream ended in a whisper.
Fireheart stared at her in horror, as her body fell silent and calm. Her breathing quickly returning to normal. His heart pounding, he stared at Yellowfang. She stared back with a hard glare. "No one must know about this. Not yet. We need time to talk to Bluestar first." She growled. He nodded frantically, but silently, understanding perfectly.
"Go back to your nest and sleep. We'll talk when Bluestar wakes" she sighed, gesturing with her tail for him to leave.
He nodded hurriedly, and sprinted back to his nest, looking back at the leaders den, his heart pounding in his ears. Sleep wasn't going to be an option. So he lay down, fidgeting all the while, and stared out of the den's entrance out to Silverpelt. *So those are supposed to save us?* He scoffed at the thought, honestly terrified at what he'd just witnessed.
"Fireheart?" Graystripe whispered
Fireheart nearly jumped out of his own pelt. His shivering must've disturbed him.
"*What*?" He snapped, shivering.
"Um, never mind. I'll uh, just go back to sleep" the cat mewed mewed, staring at him, shocked. Fireheart immediately regretted it.
"I'm sorry for snapping. But can we talk in the morning?" He pleaded. Graystripe seemed to get the message, wordlessly tilting his head back and laying back down into the nest. Fireheart snuggled closer to comfort Graystripe, as well as himself.

"Fireheart, What was that all about last night?" Graystripe pestered as they got up from the nest and headed for morning patrol.
Fireheart was about to tell him everything, but then remembered Yellowfang's warning.
"It was nothing" Fireheart insisted, shaking his head.
He was slightly put out when Graystripe stepped in front of him
"You promised that you'd tell me. Are we really going to lie to each other? Why the secrets?" He asked.
Graystripe don't do this. Not now. He silently begged. Fireheart tried to push past, but Graystripe stepped in the way, with a grave look etched on his face.

"Look Graystripe. Yellowfang made me swear not to tell anyone. What am I supposed to do?" He asked, staring at Graystripe's front paws with a defeated frown.
"So I'll tell you, but just remember that you're the one forcing me to break my promise," Huffed Fireheart, staring back up into Graystripe's eyes.
They stared at each other, the tension growing slowly.
"*Grr* fine. Forget I asked. Lets go. Patrol's waiting" hissed Graystripe over his shoulder, stalking away.
I'm sorry Graystripe. I love you to death, but this is something that I have to keep to myself for now. He shook his head to clear it, and trotted off to catch up to the patrol. Sitting and bickering doesn't fill our bellies. *He will just have to suck it up for now*. He to himself

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Two days had passed since Bluestar had seen the prophecy, and Bluestar had only just woken up. Yellowfang managed to convince every cat that she'd just been really exhausted from a trip to Windclan. Still, quite odd that she had been comatose for as long as she was. And in other news, Graystripe still refused to talk to him. "If you refuse to tell me what's going on, then so do I" he'd say. Fireheart has gotten sick of it and gave up trying to reason with the stubborn tom.
Fireheart was returning from a hunting patrol with sandstorm and Frostfur. Hunting didn't go so well, not only did he not have his hunting partner, who was intent on ignoring him, but his mind was also scattered. Fragmented between all the ways recent events have gone awry.

"Fireheart. Bluestar wants to see you" Runningwind informed him gruffly, brushing past him, entering the warriors den to rest his wounds.
They had a small spat with ShadowClan on afternoon patrol, led by Tigerclaw. Somehow Fireheart didn't think that ShadoClan was to blame.

Fireheart hurried over to his leader, ducking under the moss covering.
When his eyes adjusted to the light, he noticed Bluestar and Yellowfang waiting patiently, and an annoyed Cinderpaw limping

back and forth a little less patiently.
"Fireheart. Sit" Bluestar commanded quietly. He quickly took a seat next to Cinderpaw.
"So, I'm sure that you are aware of why we are all here" Yellowfang began retelling the prophecy, while Bluestar listened attentively, her expression unreadable.

"Hmm. I see. First *fire will save the clan,* now we have to have *Balance*? This is the second prophecy in a row that we've had. I suppose a fire *could* shine bright like a sun, and too much is bad, so storm puts it out? Or maybe, fire saves the clan, and storm saves the fire..? I don't know, but it can't be a coincidence, surely." She offered, looking a little unsure all of a sudden, a small pool of doubt trickling into her eyes. It was slight, but it was there. Fireheart was taken aback by her response. He'd never seen her at all unsure of herself, because she always carried herself with such dignity and composure. Was this really went on in the background, while every cat gathered fresh kill and patrolled borders? It was a scary thought that below the surface, everything wasn't running as smoothly as he'd once thought.
"Bluestar. I know this is a lot to ask, but don't you think that maybe now is a good time to let the clan in on this?" Fireheart asked gingerly.
"Why?" She shot back? He looked at his paws, shifting his weight.
"Well... Graystripe knows that I am hiding something. There is lots of tension between us and I don't know how much longer he's gonna stand for my secrecy. Please don't make me lie to him." He spoke hesitantly, suddenly feeling a little selfish at his request, but stood by it none the less.
She stared at him for a second, then dipped her head,
"Very well. It's probably for the best to let the clan know anyway" she mewed with a resigned sigh. With that they stepped out of her den.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for clan meeting!" She called, leaping up onto the highrock, all disconcertion that had been so painfully obvious gone, like it was never there.
The warriors and apprentices all gathered in the center, while the queens sat outside the nursery, and Yellowfang sat next to the

highrock, adjacent from Tigerclaw, but keeping her distance, and the elders just angled their heads toward the clearing.

Fireheart sat next to Graystripe, who ignored him. No greeting, no nuzzle of affection. He stared at the scruffy gray warrior with sadness. It hurt. He pressed his head into the gray warriors shoulder, who didn't pull away but didn't pull in either. Fireheart sighed and stared forward.

"Cats of ThunderClan, we have been sent a message from StarClan" she yowled.
murmurs spread through the gathered cats. Yellowfang stepped forward and recited the prophecy.
"This is what we've been given. However, we do not know what it means, but please, this also does not warrant panic." She finished, rather brutally, leaving the cluster of cats in discomfort.
"The medicine cat doesn't know what it means" Frostfur whimpered.
"What do we do?" Runningwind glowered, very seriously.
"She sounds very sure." Sandstorm remarked, annoyed.
"It doesn't sound like they are holding much hope" Longtail whispered, looking deflated.
Then, fireheart noticed Tigerclaw stand up.
"Quiet!" He yowled at the top of his voice, and every cat fell silent.
"Quit your incessant quibbling about a situation that is out of our paws. Your leader is still speaking!" He growled and sat down, his tail folded neatly over his paws.
"Thank you, Tigerclaw. Now, as I was saying, we are not sure of any connection to our activity. Yellowfang will converse with the other clans' medicine cats at their half- moon visit to the moonstone. Any suggestions are more than welcome, no matter how crazy they might sound.
And last things last, Graystripe, I'd like to see you" She finished, looking directly at the gray warrior. He looked slightly sick. He turned to Fireheart, any squabbles forgotten for that moment.
"Do you think she knows about Silverstream?" He asked, but Fireheart just shook his head, ushering him toward Bluestar, who was waiting for them.
"Sit. Both of you face each other."
She commanded. Without thought we obediently did as we were told, staring at each other, avoiding eye contact.

"Now, I want you to deal with whatever it is you're going through, and you're not getting up until you do. I refuse to have my strongest hunting pair constantly at each other's throats or downright ignoring each other. Now deal with it!" She hissed, turning to leave. Fireheart knew what she was doing, and he silently thanked his leader and former mentor. She really had listened more carefully in the den than he thought she did.
"Well fireheart. You can start by telling me this secret that you're keeping." Graystripe began, forcefully taking the lead.
Fireheart looked down awkwardly.
"Well Graystripe, you see. Bluestar just told everyone the secret, so there's no point." He mewed, a small chuckle at the top of his tongue, ending in a sigh.
"Wait, So that was it? Well now I feel like the foxheart." He laughed sheepishly.
"Yeah. I couldn't tell you. Yellowfang made me keep it a secret, remember. You know Graystripe, it really hurt, the way you treated me the past few days." Fireheart sighed, still feeling a little hollow from Graystripe's spite.
"Look Fireheart. I didn't mean to be so cruel. It just hurt that it felt like you couldn't trust me with a secret. But for what it's worth, I really am sorry." He said, stepping forward in an offer, which Fireheart gladly accepted, a feeling of butterflies in his belly, stepping to meet Graystripe half way. They touched muzzles and Fireheart licked Graystripe affectionately. Graystripe was getting g better at apologizing.
"Aww. You are adorable." Sandstorm cut in, followed by Dustpelt. "I wish I could ask 'when will the kits arrive?' But, I guess, well..." She finished awkwardly. "Well it's nice to see that you two made up. The camp is so awkward when you fight." added Dustpelt,

Then in the midst, it hit Fireheart. It felt like a stone dropping in his gut, and in a small panic he realized something. They really couldn't have kits, no matter how in love they were. It was such an obvious thing, and yet he never even considered it.
They'd never get to have a family.

Chapter 5

The past couple of moons has been uneventful but decent. Runningwind was busily describing in great detail his hunt and how he caught several voles, acting it out for emphasis, to a very bored Fireheart who was slowly finding it harder and harder to look the slightest bit interested in the furball's self-indulgence.

Just then, Graystripe came bursting through the gorse tunnel, straight toward him.
"You have to come." He panted. Fireheart happily joined his friend, all too Fine with leaving Runningwind's gloating. His *'flawlessy'* hunted fresh kill could keep him company.

They came sprinting through the forest, pushing into the undergrowth, but stopped for a breath.
"So what is it?" Fireheart questioned, looking at the gray warrior with avid interest.
"It's Silverstream. She's kitting!" He panted, panic written in his eyes. Fireheart's heart suddenly picked up.
"Then why are we still waiting around?"-Fireheart yowled -"lets go!" He started pacing himself, pushing through the brambles, Graystripe in tow.
As they got closer to the edge of the territory, Fireheart could smell the Silverstream's fear scent, to which he pushed further.

"AHHHH!" He heard a shriek of pain, and exiting the fronds, he spotted the queen on her side, muzzle crunched up in pain. Fireheart froze in fear at what he saw next. There was so much blood. Too much. He'd never seen a kitting before, but he was sure that this wasn't supposed to happen.
The queen writhed in pain and, yet, no one could help her.
"Silverstream!" Graystripe called, rushing over to her side. Fireheart crept over to the two, and when he reached them, he saw a kit already laying beside his mother, gray like his father, but a darker shade.
Before Fireheart could finish admiring the little kit, he heard the

queen cry, and a she-kit was born, silver like her mother.

He looked back over to Silverstream, who lay limply, eyes tired.

"Silverstream. They're beautiful" Fireheart mewed softly. She smiled weakly.

She just lay slumped. This was not the feisty queen he knew. This was a frail husk vaguely shaped like Silverstream, as though death had already stolen her from them, leaving nothing but a body that breathes and bleeds. he watched as the life force dissipating from her with every moment that went by. She looked so weak. Fireheart had no time to feel or even think. It was all he could do just to stay conscious at the scene before him. Her breath was labored and her eyes glazed. When their gazes connected, there was a silent understanding that she wasn't long with them. Her gaze then zipped back to Graystripe.

"Graystripe"- She lifted her head to look at him, -"listen to me. Take good care of our kits" she whispered.
"What are you saying? You're taking them back to your clan. Or maybe you can come with-"

Silverstream cut him off . -" Graystripe. We both know that I won't be leaving this river... Fireheart, Please make sure he doesn't beat himself up over this. He's better spend that time looking after the kits."
Fireheart tried to respond, but his voice caught on his throat. He looked over to Graystripe, and his eyes were welling with tears. He felt his heart bruising, wrenched from his chest and thrown at the ground, trodden upon and shoved down his throat. Now, all he could do was choke on his words. The rain in his eyes threatened to fall, but he pulled it back. He doesn't have the right to cry yet. Graystripe needed him more than ever now.
He padded tentatively over to his love, pressing his muzzle comfortingly into the crook in his neck.
"It's okay Graystripe. Just- *cough* bring them back to Thunderclan as *cough cough* rogue kits. It will be better for everyone if no one knows their Riverclan heritage." She choked, staring at the river, her head down on the rocks.
Graystripe gently pushed away from him and padded over to

Silverstream.
"I will always love you Graystripe. Even if we aren't together in the end. Please love me through the kits. This isn't goodbye, because I'm still here, and *cough cough* I... *always*..." her breathing shuddered to a halt mid-sentence. Her soft face fell to the ground and the spark that lit her eyes was now dull and lifeless. She was no more. Silverstream was gone. "She's with StarClan now Graystripe... Come. We have kits to take care of. Please Graystripe" Fireheart nudged him pleadingly, gesturing toward the pathetic bundle of gray and silver fur, padding over to clean them, before heading to a batch of herbs to clean off the kits' scent with. The ground around Fireheart felt haunted and harrowed, like they were unwelcome here.
It was all he could do to keep it together when all he could smell was the fear-scent seeping off of Graystripe and the dead mother of his kits.
"Graystripe. Come!" He snapped, the weight of the situation battering at him compounded by his fear causing him massive agitation.
The gray warrior dragged himself over and picked up the silver daughter. She whimpered as he lifted her, demanding to be put down.
Fireheart gently picked up the gray tom—who didn't whimper, but instead swung his paws around in a tantrum, but didn't whine—and they carried the mint-scented kits back to camp. They'd bury Silverstream once they returned, though Fireheart doubted that there'd be time to return today.
And with that, they headed home, detouring through the mint field to cover themselves from Silverstream's scent.

If Bluestar ever found out what happened here, she'd have his head.

Chapter 6

Fireheart was stood next to Graystripe, faced with the gorse tunnel into camp, carrying the two kits by the scruff. Fireheart had told Graystripe to jump in the river to wash the tear stains and smell off of his coat, and they'd play it off as him slipping into the water.

"Well it's now or never. Lets just do this."
Fireheart's biggest worry is that some cat might connect the dots between the kits fur Colour and Graystripe. They won't be able to prove anything, but it would instill suspicion, and that could be just as bad.
They entered the camp and immediately eyes turned to them, some with shock, others curiosity. It was unsettling. Under everyone's scrutinizing gaze, even Fireheart felt guilty, and he hadn't even done anything wrong. He couldn't imagine how Graystripe was feeling.

They placed the kits down. Fireheart tried to act as brazen as possible, but he wasn't sure that he was doing a very good job.
In no time their clanmates had encircled them, murmuring and eyeing the kits suspiciously.
"What is this?" The cats turned their heads to see Bluestar skulking out of her den and stalking to the center of the clearing.
Not giving Graystripe the chance to screw this up by falling over his words, Fireheart stepped forward.
"We found these kits at the edge of the clan territory. There was no scent attached to them, nor was there any evidence that the mother had been in the area for quite some time. They were abandoned in a mint field, so I assume the lack of scent was deliberate. They appeared to have been abandoned. We had searched for a while, but honestly, if we hadn't found the kits, there would be no proof that another cat was ever on the territory at all." He finished, holding Bluestar's gaze steadily.
"And what's wrong with him" Bluestar directed her gaze to Graystripe, who looked like he wanted to break down.
"I think he's just angry. And cold. He fell into the river, so it's safe to

assume it's shock from the river and the discovery." He replied, looking back at Graystripe, silently imploring him to get a hold of himself.
Bluestar stared at them for a few more seconds, her eyes unreadable.
After a couple seconds of examining them, she stood up, and turned back toward her den, beckoning him to follow with a flick of her tail, leaving Graystripe with the kits.
They padded to the edge of the clearing, and Bluestar disappeared into her den. He loitered outside for a couple seconds, staring into the sun-deprived hole, curtained in moss.

With a sigh he pushed through the moss, and took a seat next to her nest.
"Now tell me what's really going on" she begun.
Firehearts chest froze up.
"W-what?" He stammered "what're you talking about?" he tried to act nonchalant, but that's hard when he nearly took an early trip to StarClan by almost choking on his tongue.
"Fireheart. Please don't lie to me. I practically raised you. I'm the closest thing you have to a mother in this clan. I was also your mentor. The point is, I know when you're lying. StarClan knows you did it enough. I'll lick a ShadowClan scent marker if I'm wrong. Now please, tell me the truth. Where did you find those kits." She looked at him with a gentle, but stern stare.
Fireheart, unable to resist, stepped forward pushed his forehead into the crook of her neck.
He needed the comfort.
"I don't know what to do." He began, tears threatening to fall at the edge of his eyes, but he held them back. He'd done enough crying for a lifetime.
She wrapped her tail over his back.
"Just tell me what has happened. We'll figure it out." Such simple words, but they worked so well.
"Okay fine."- he leaned back -"I'll tell you"
He sat back on his haunches.
"I'll start from the beginning. Just don't interrupt until I've finished." He meowed.
She nodded.

He fumbled through the whole story about how he'd followed Graystripe out of camp once and found him flirting with Silverstream and all about how he tried to get him to break it off, after all, it was against the warrior code.

"But it was too late. She was already expecting kits. This was the same time that I'd admitted my feelings toward him. By now they'd broken it off, and they decided that one of them would bring the kits back to the clan, and act as if they were either rogue kits or of an unknown father, depending on which parent they go with, but then.. then Silverstream... she didn't make it. Her wish was to let them grow up without the half clan stigma, so we decided to make it seem like we found the kits on the clan border, near the treecut place." He stopped to catch himself when he realized how quickly he was speaking, then begun again more slowly.
"so, I really don't know what to do. I know that it's a lot to ask. You can punish Graystripe, and even me, but please let the kits grow up loved" he begged, his head bent respectfully. He looked back up at her and she was staring out of the den directly at the kits, rested against Graystripe, seemingly in deep thought. She then looked back at him with a deep sigh,
"I'm very disappointed that you tried to lie to me. Especially about something like this. But.." she looked at him, her gaze hazing as though she was recalling a painful memory.
"Alright" She finally resigned. He opened his mouth to thank her, but she cut him off.
"But they're your responsibility. Take them to Yellowfang, and have them checked over, but *you* have to look after them. Goldenflower has her own kits to take care of, without adding two more that aren't even hers." He stared for a moment.
"Bluestar, are you suggesting I mother them? Like...In the nursery?" He asked. surely he misunderstood.
"If need be. Unless you have another solution. You and Graystripe are a team, you sort it out." She huffed simply.
Fireheart was taken aback by her proposition. *A tom in the nursery*? To his knowledge, that has never happened before. But why not? It wasn't against the warrior code. If the mother wanted to keep to her warrior duties, and the father didn't mind, then was there really anything problematic about it? All the mother would have to do is feed them every day. *Speaking of which.*

"Bluestar, even if I, you know - or Graystripe - did... uhm, rear them... they don't have milk." He fumbled, embarrassment overtaking him.
"That's fine. I'm sure Goldenflower wouldn't mind feeding them. But my point still stands. Either you or Graystripe must raise them. That is non-negotiable." The leader shook herself out, "Otherwise you can take them to RiverClan and explain to Crookedstar why he shouldn't have Graystripe's head." She looked to him expectantly.
Fireheart stared at the ground for a moment, then at the kits and finally back at his own paws. Paws that would never rear kits of his own if he and Graystripe were mates. It seemed so obvious. *If I don't take this opportunity, will there ever be another?* Besides they were *Graystripe's* kits. If he and Graystripe were mates, then Graystripe's kits were his kits, right? *I guess I even have a* duty *to care for these kits. These are our kits*. Fireheart rationalized the decision to his satisfaction and looked back up at Bluestar. "Okay, I'll raise them." He meowed determinedly. She blinked at him with approval, "Good. Now come, we don't want those kits to freeze to death out in the open." And Fireheart followed her out of the den, into the center of the camp, where the kits were huddled against Graystripe for warmth.
"Graystripe. Take the kits to yellowfang." Fireheart yowled.
"Fireheart has kindly volunteered to take care of them, although"- Bluestar mewed and turned her head to Goldenflower -"we'd be very grateful if you were able to spare some milk for the critters." Bluestar dipped her head toward the queen in a respectful plead. Fireheart did the same. The queen turned her head toward the kits for a second, pity in her eyes, then nodded her head.
"How could I say no." She meowed
"Thank you Goldenflower" Fireheart meowed.
Bluestar seemed satisfied.
"Very well then, in that case, I'd like to introduce you to our newest Thunderclan members"- she looked at Fireheart,
"Featherkit and Stormkit" he answered. That was what Silverstream had named the two tykes. He felt a sense of loyalty to the she-cat to keep their names as she wanted them.

"Featherkit! Stormkit! Featherkit! Stormkit! Featherkit! Stormkit!"

Fireheart was surprised by the enthusiasm from the clan who'd

generally been quite contemptuous to outsiders.

The every cat howled the kits names joyously at the prospect of new life in the clan. Every cat but Tigerclaw, who just stared at the kits with a strange glint in his eyes.

Chapter 7

Fireheart was shuffling through the fresh kill pile, searching for vole to take to Goldenflower, and hopefully a mouse for himself.

They'd brought the kits to the clan in the morning and it was now sundown, but Fireheart had tried to avoid the nursery as much as he could, knowing that he'd have to sleep there for the next six moons anyway. He felt the determination that he mentally built up turn to slop when he really thought about the implications of having kits. *The time that they'll steal from me, the sleepless nights I hear the queens complaining about all the time, th*e-

"Fireheart!" Graystripe called from the warriors den, interrupting his self-destructive thoughts, running, brushing past Fireheart affectionately. Fireheart purred, embracing the contact.
Graystripe placed his forehead on fireheart's
"Thank you for looking after my kits." He whispered.
"It's no problem. You're lucky you're such a furball. Just understand that you will be the one bringing *me* fresh kill. Every morning of every day, and if you don't, I'll eat the kits instead" he joked whispering a little, a *murr* of laughter rolling in this throat, brushing past his mate lovingly.
With that, he picked up the vole and mouse, and headed back to the nursery where Goldenflower was feeding the kits.
Pushing through the the entrance, he placed the vole at the queen's paws and then stared at his adopted kits, who were feeding with zeal.
"Thank you, Fireheart" She meowed.
But he was barely listening. He had taken the kits to Yellowfang earlier today.
'They're small, cold and desperately feeble, even for kits. You'll have to keep a watchful eye on them' she'd said, but looking now, he didn't think that they'd have much of a problem with them, well not until they're old enough the cause trouble. In truth, he was certain that they'd be a duty that he'd undertake and he would complete it, but the more he looked on, the more he realized that he was quite

taken with them and wondered how the rest of the clan felt. *Do they all feel like they might just die for them?*
Though, as he stared at the kits, he felt a worm of envy at having a whole clan to look after them. Fireheart found himself wishing that he had his mother to cause mischief around, but his twolegs had gotten rid of him so soon that he never even really knew his mother.
He quickly stopped himself when he realized that he was frowning, and that the queen was staring at him strangely.
"Oh uh, ahem. No problem." He quickly replied to her thanks, before laying down in his nest that Brackenpaw had built at the order of Whitestorm.
"So how are they?" He asked, twisting his head to look her way.
"They're beautiful and strong. You don't have anything to worry about. I promise if there is anything wrong, you'll be the first to know." She purred out a chuckle.

He stared out of the nursery entrance and realized that the sun had gone down, and the camp was in darkness.
Featherkit lay in the curve of his belly in a tight bundle, while Stormkit curled up in the crook of his shoulder, stretched out, paws wrapped around his foreleg. It was so strange to be here.
When he joined the clan, he never even pictured that there would come a day where he would have kits. Yet, now here he is, his first of many days in the nursery for queens. He would be lying to himself if said he didn't feel his pelt prickle with embarrassment when other cats saw him there. He had to bite his tongue to refrain from snapping at Longtail when he passed by the nursery but stopped to stare for a moment, as though it were a spectacle.

Graystripe, you so owe me. He thought to himself. But as he stared at the tiny bodies, everything seemed to fade away, and their rhythmic breathing slowly put him to sleep. He knew that he wasn't just doing this for Graystripe.
He lay his head down, his muzzle pressed against Stormkit, and fell into an easy sleep.

Morning came quickly and he sat up and gave himself a clean. But something felt odd. Empty and cold. Looking down, realized with a jolt that the kits were not there. He sat up quickly, and did I quick

panicked circle, trying to spot if they'd fell out. Nowhere. They were gone. He hurried out of the nest yowling, but to no avail. No one could hear him. He dashed straight out of the camp, into the forest. He was running through in a blind panic, when out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a faint glow, and skidded to a stop. It was coming from the training hollow.
He pushed through the brush, ignoring thorns that pricked his skin. There was a Dark smoke-gray tom with his kits at his paws.
"Who are you and why do you have those kits?" Fireheart growled, digging his claws into the ground, the fur on his shoulders prickling.
"My name is Gray wing. I am here simply as a SrarClan messenger, and I've come for a very simple reason." he finished, looking down at the kits.

So this cat was StarClan? Fireheart shook his head. Right then that wasn't the important part, in fact he couldn't care if this cat was from LionClan.
"So what is it then?" He asked, his head bowed slightly, paying the StarClan Warrior his begrudging respect.
"I've simply come to ask you a question. One simple question. You may love these kits, this may be you showing the one you love how far you're willing to go for them. But is this really what you want?"
Is this really what I want? What a stupid question. But the more Fireheart thought about it, the more he started understanding the weight of the question. Was this really how he wanted to spend his youth? As a parent, when he could be out in the forest, hunting and patrolling, fighting and climbing.
"Fireheart" Gray wings words snapped him out of his deep thought. "There is no right or wrong answer. All I'm asking is that you take this seriously and really decide if this is what you want. Now, I'll let you get back to your dreaming"
And with that, the kits scampered to his side, and as they reached him, a flash of light went through his mind, and he was suddenly reminded of the prophecy. Suddenly, there was so much more to consider than if he just wanted the kits. But as fast as it appeared, it was gone, and so were the kits, as well as everything else, and surprisingly, he was blessed with a dreamless rest of the night.

He woke early the next day. The first day of six moons waking up in

the confines of the milky scented nursery. This time, he could feel the silver bundle of fur at his belly, and a dark gray muzzle in his face, both fast asleep. He sighed relief.

He lifted his head carefully so as to not disturb them, and then stared around at the silver bundle, and then back at the dark gray one, who's muzzle had relocated to his foreleg. This was so foreign to him. Nothing about what he was doing felt natural, and yet, he couldn't imagine it any other way.
He felt a rush of affection well up in him, and he started cleaning Stormkit, seeing as he made it the easiest to reach. He whimpered and tried to swipe at Fireheart, but that's hard to do when you haven't opened your eyes yet. Fireheart just purred and continued long strokes along his back, and watched Goldenflower stare at him with a smile, from the corner of his eye.
How could he even consider abandoning them. He decided quickly. These were the kits of his mate, making them his by affiliation.

He would love and raise these kits like Silverstream would've done. A mother didn't have to be a she cat, a mother is a parent who loves you unconditionally and treats you as family, and he'd be their mother as best as he could.
No stupid prophecy is going to get in the way o that.

Chapter 8

It was almost sunhigh. Fireheart hadn't told any cat about his visit from Starclan, and he didn't plan to. Not yet al least. The kits had just finished feeding and were now clambering over him. They hadn't even opened their eyes, yet they were already causing trouble, and they didn't even know where they were going.
He just hoped that they would start eating solid prey soon, because he could feel the first chilled breeze flowing through the camp, signaling the soon-to-be arrival of leaffall, and Goldenflower would start finding it more difficult to feed them once prey went into hiding.
I hope that there aren't too many kits for her to handle.
Fireheart shook the thought from his head. Queens sometimes fed five kits at once. She was fine.
Besides, surely she would tell me if it became too much.

His disturbed thoughts were interrupted by Darkstripe pushing through the bramble entrance to the den, and the scent of mouse followed, he wordlessly dropped one at goldenflower's paws, then moved over to place one in front of him, then ducked out of the entrance.
"It must really irk him to be told to deliver prey to *me*" he *mreowed* in laughter, to which Goldenflower joined in after seeing Darkstripe's painfully obvious half-attempt at hiding his disgruntled expression. He never did like Darkstripe, and after that comment about having kits from a couple moons back, it felt right for the comedic irony to come back around.
Kits are the future of the clan, and so even Darkstripe wouldn't cause trouble in the nursery. That would found severe punishment.

Just then though, as if right on cue, Darkstripe's brown face popped back into the nursery, and this time he had a glint in his eye that didn't suit him,
"You know kittypet, when I asked if you planned on having kits, I didn't mean it as a challenge" he meowed, earning himself an eruption of laughing *mreows* from the nursery. Fireheart almost

choked on freshkill trying to keep it together. Fireheart keened at the usually glum warrior,
"Well, sometimes even you have good ideas." He meowed, padding a second round of chuckles from his denmates. And a... a smile from Darkstripe? He wasn't sure, but it looked like what someone may construe to be a smile. Then the dark warrior dipped his head and left, leaving the nursery to compose themselves. Darkstripe was certainly not his friend, and a little joke wouldn't change that, but if the dark warrior showed this side of himself more often, maybe they didn't have to be at each other's throats.

One uneventful moon later...

Firehearts breath came out in clouds of mist.
The weather had taken a turn for the coldest.
"You're supposed to *stop* the moss ball, mouse brain" Featherkit mewed at her brother, who was backing out of a fern bush, his fur fluffed up in embarrassment, whilst Tawnykit and Bramblekit watched on, possibly contemplating asking to join in the game.
Fireheart got up and padded over to his kits
"Featherkit, that wasn't very nice now was it? How would you like it if Stormkit called you that, hmm?" Fireheart scolded softly, but sternly.
She hung her head with shame.
"Not good" she mumbled.
"Now do you have anything you want to say to your brother?" He asked, pointing his tail at Stormkit, who was pawing awkwardly at the moss ball.
"... I'm sorry Stormkit" she muttered.
"Good. Now go ask Bramblekit and Tawnykit if they want to play with you. They look bored." He finished, licking the top of her head affectionately, before padding tentatively over to Stormkit,
"Your sister said sorry. Now go show her that you're just as good at moss ball as she is." He whispered, licking the top of his head, and nudged him toward his sister, who was heading back with a happy looking Tawnykit and Bramblekit in tow.
Fireheart headed to lay down beside Graystripe, resting his head against his shoulder.
"They grow up fast don't they? You're a natural" The Gray warrior began. It had been a more than a moon since the last time they just

took the time to laze around together.
Fireheart sighed. It hadn't felt natural. It felt like every decision he made was the wrong one, a voice in his mind screaming that he isn't their mother, nor their father for that matter, that he doesn't know what's best for them. At some point he learned to tune out the voice. He never confided about it to Graystripe. He was secretly scared that if he let the gray warrior know how out of his depth he felt, that he'd see Fireheart like a failure of a mate. So whenever the topic steered that direction, he would divert it somewhere else.
"I'm just glad they can finally eat fresh kill. I know it's wrong, but I was started to feel insecure about Goldenflower contributing more than I was" he chuckled the last part.
Graystripe licked his cheek, sending a warm tingle down his neck. "You cared for them, cleaned them, and kept them warm through the worst of the cold, and if you could've fed them, you would've."
If I could've. I couldn't though. Graystripe was unwittingly fueling his doubts.
He finished his fresh kill, his eyes locked on the kits.
"Speaking of cold, I hope it doesn't get any worse. I'm not comfortable with them being outside in this weather as it is." Fireheart lamented half to himself.
"You know, kits are tougher than you think. Don't worry so much. And besides, it isn't even Leafbare yet." Goldenflower appeared from the nursery, carrying in her jaws, the old moss. Her and fireheart had come to an agreement that they'd take turns to clean out the nursery.
"I know. But still, it's hard to not worry." He sighed.
He'd already decided that the moment they started shivering, even a little bit, he'd bring them inside. He was not going to take his chances with Greencough. Whitecough had already hit Dustpelt, who was now confined to the medicine den, despite his hissing and spitting. Yellowfang had left before sunrise to search for catmint, entrusting the camp to Cinderpaw for the while, but she was yet to return, so Fireheart guessed that she wasn't having much luck.
He was about to head back into the nursery entrance when a thick pelt brushed against his flank, veering him toward the gorse entrance to the camp.
He sighed easily,
"What is it Graystripe?" He asked, to which the gray warrior flicked his ears amusedly.

"I think you've spent too much time in camp. We're going hunting. Don't want to lose practice do you?" Asked.
Fireheart glared at him warm-heartedly. He knew what the warrior was doing. *"Take your eyes off the kits for just a second and watch them still be here when you get back" is what you meant to say.* He mentally rolled his eyes.
"Fine. I could use the space to clear my head" he finally responded after a couple seconds thought.
So, tails entwined, pelts brushing, they padded out the camp out into the forest.

After a while, Fireheart sighed a contented breath,
"It's been a little while since it's been just us. No camp, no kits, no big problem looming over our heads. It's nice. I almost forgot what it was like." Fireheart purred.
"Well there is the prophecy. But I'm sure if it were pressing right now, StarClan would be more persistent. Besides. It is the leader and medicine cats job to worry about that." Graystripe answered, oblivious to Fireheart wincing at the his pessimism.
"Well aren't you just a ray of sunshine today?" Fireheart meowed, giving him a friendly bump on the flank.
Suddenly a funny look planted itself on Graystripe's face.
"Let's get out of here. Lets leave the clan territory completely" he suggested, as if half expecting a positive answer to his completely rational, not at all crazy idea.
"Do you have bees in your brain?" He demanded, staring at him, checking that he hadn't grown an extra head.
Fireheart was still taken aback.
"Are you crazy?" He reiterated after a moment.
Fireheart stepped toward him brushing against him.
"C'mon why not?" He asked, staring into his fiery mate's eyes.
"Because it's outside of the territory." He retorted.
"Come on. The warrior code says that we can't trespass on *other* clans territory. It says nothing about leaving the territories completely." He reminded him.
The Fireheart sat on deep thought for a while.
"Come on. We're not apprentices. Lets enjoy it." The Gray warrior threw in to help him decide.
After a second, he lost the battle in his own mind, and sighed with exasperation.

"Fine. Just because it will get you to stop nagging me. Maybe you're best suited for the elders den" He meowed with a small smirk.
"Ha ha. So funny. You should be the clan comedy cat." Graystripe retorted, ears hot at his partners remark.
"Well come on then" Graystripe ushered Fireheart along toward the border.
"Wait." Fireheart paused. "No. This is a positively bad idea. Graystripe, we have kits waiting for us at home! They'll have a fit if I'm not there at sundown." He caterwauled, pacing.
Graystripe just stared on, shaking his head.
"Fine. If it puts your mind at ease, *I'll* go back and let someone know to tell the clan that we're out. How does that sound?" The gray warrior coaxed. Fireheart stared at him blankly, then at the ground, then shook his head in defeat,
"Fine."

Chapter 9

As they threaded through the thick brush, Fireheart's nose twitched as they neared the
scent line edge of the border.
It wasn't *forbidden* to leave the forest, but it's just not something that cats do. They don't generally have the need to leave warrior territory.
"Well come on. Lets go" Graystripe prompted, but of all the times, fireheart's legs didn't want to move, as he stared across the border at the uncharted land.
"What's wrong? Don't tell me that you've decided to be the scaredy mouse. Not after all this, c'mon I even covered for us. Runningwind will tell Bluestar, Bluestar will tell Goldenflower, who I'm sure will tell the kits." Graystripe cooed, possibly more rudely than he meant to be.
This is unexplored territory. That means that no cat has seen any of the dangers past here. Fireheart thought to himself, realizing the danger in what they were about to do.
As the thought bounced around in his head, he became painfully aware that he was responsible for more than just his own life now.
What was I thinking? How could I do such a stupid thing? Why would I ever- his train of thought was cut of by Graystripe bumping him on the rump.
"Come on. There's no place for being uptight now. And who knows, maybe we can be more romantic when we are finally away from prying eyes" Graystripe whispered the last part.
To that, all the thoughts vanished from his mind, and all he could see was his handsome mate standing stoically in front of him, and he leaned in against him.
"Alright. You've convinced me. Well done.
But don't go thinking that this was my idea." He said teasingly, rubbing against the gray tom's flank, taking the lead, and without a moments hesitation, stepped over the scent-line.

They had been padding for a little while and the sun was now atop the sky, directly above the pair and tree cover became sparse,

meaning there was little to no relief from heat, and Fireheart, being out of practice from the past couple moons, was panting lightly as traveling became more of an effort. And as if that wasn't enough, as they padded further, the scenery had become more and more alien, and they were both silent, but acutely aware that they were at a disadvantage if they were to be caught in an ambush, so they carefully kept their wits about them, not daring to meow too loudly, or step without looking.

Soon though, they came across a massive thick tree that looked like its branches were roots, and it bared fruit with a hard shell and it had a strong scent.
"This is so weird. It's huge." Graystripe commented.
"Yeah. I've never seen anything like it." Fireheart agreed, creeping over to the tree and attempting to hook a claw into it. To his surprise, it slid right in and sat comfortably, yet still held firm.
He turned to his partner and beckoned him.
"Come over here. This tree is sturdier than anything in the forest, and I reckon we could get to the very top branches without any snapping." Fireheart meowed enthusiastically, secretly enjoying the shade that the tree provided.

Fireheart looked back at Graystripe for a response, but instead spotted him sniffing at one of the grounded fruits.
"Graystripe. That could be poisonous." He warned, beyond careful in the untamed territory.
The gray tom was eyeing the fruit inquisitively, and after a couple moments, his eyes widened with excitement.
"Fireheart!" He called from the ground.
"I remember the elders mentioning something about a fruit that makes cats dizzy." He mewed.
"This must be it, because they said that it doesn't grow inside the territory." He meowed, his voice holding a hint of whine in it.
"Do you think that we should take some back with us when we're done?" He asked, his eyes kit-like and pleading.
Fireheart had leaped from the tree to inspect the fruits, but as soon as Graystripe said that, his head shot up.
"Are you crazy? Bringing strange plants from outside the territory back to camp? For all we know it could be deadly poisonous. Besides, why would you *want* to be dizzy?" Fireheart scolded him in

an effort to dissipate the panic that Graystripe instilled on him with that suggestion.
His ears drooped in frustration.
"Fine"-, the gray warrior mewed, rolling his eyes. -"I see your point".
"Good" Fireheart mewed, distractedly. Something had caught his eye, red and fluttering.
He had been so focused on the massive tree, he failed to register that they had reached a new forest treeline maybe thirty foxlengths away. He looked up into a thin tree with a flat-leaf top and saw a robin hopping from branch to branch, headed toward what, now that he thought about it, felt like a fresh breeze, and coming from the same direction, was the sound of rushing water.

Quickly and excitedly, Fireheart paced toward it, led by the promise of shade and possible water, and Graystripe followed close behind. As they neared the source, the air seemed to get cooler, and the breeze picked up, blowing into the fiery queen's face, soothing the fatigue he'd been feeling, filling him with a new energy to chase after the source of the feeling.
As they chased the robin further into the forest, the breeze became cooler and air became moist before suddenly, they burst through the trees and before them was a magnificent waterfall splashing down from the top of a massive cliff into a big pool in the middle of a clearing and water sprayed out in all directions as it hit the pool. Around the pool, the clearing looked like a grassy, miniature meadow. Flowers of all different colours and scents filled out along the clearing, and lilies lined the body of water.
"Great Starclan! It's so beautiful." Fireheart breathed in awe.
"Yeah. You are" Graystripe responded slyly.
Fireheart looked at him, bemused, before realizing what he meant, and a smirk fell on his face.
"Ha ha. You're adorable." He mewed, moving over to the gray tom and coiling his tail with his own, brushing against his flank, before dashing straight for the stream and dipped his whole head in. He wasn't Riverclan, but he'll make an exception for this heat.
As he gulped down the icy water, he was shocked at how cold it was, and he felt his body cool down noticeably with each mouthful of water he swallowed.

Graystripe padded over to Fireheart while he lapped at the pool,

and sat down.
"Well, beautiful. I suppose we've found our secret spot."
Fireheart lifted his head, water dripping from his chin, and licked his mate's cheek.
"I guess we have." He meowed, leaning up against his mates shoulder.

"Do you think we should get back?" The queen whispered in his mate's ear. Graystripe shrugged.
"We asked to have some alone time. I'm sure they won't mind if we stay out a little later." He meowed suggestively, pressing down against his mate's side, Sending them barreling to the floor, Graystripe ending up on top.
"I love you" Fireheart mewed, pushing his muzzle into his mate's scruff.
"I know. And I love you more" Graystripe whispered back. Fireheart smirked seductively.
"Do you now?"

Chapter 10

[image]

Hey guys. Thank you for the positivity on the last chapter. It means so much and warms my heart. Especially when it came out like... a month late.
And then below is came crazy good fanart from dragonskies.

Thank you for taking the time to draw this. You're incredibly talented and I absolutely love it!

Now, let's get back to that story shall we.

_____

The sun had risen above the green treeline, sending its rays echoing through the pool, throwing flecks of light out against the rock wall of the waterfall, creating the illusion of life behind the watery shower while the light danced in and out of the pool, glittering as it flickered to and fro through the sunburnt water.
The sky, a crimson red, the rays burning valiantly through the sky, filtering down against the green grass of the meadow, setting it ablaze in waves of golden radiance, the complementary blues no longer held down by the constraints of the long barren night. The light seems to rise from the ground, almost as if lighting the sky of its own volition.
Thereby the two cats lay curled up, looking like a single ball of ember and coal.
Fireheart was the first to break from this figure, sitting up, looking to be in a disheveled mess. But he felt far better then he looked. He needed it. A night where he could forget about how insecure and unsure he felt. How their kits would be in better paws with anyone other than him. Right now, he felt at peace. He desperately hoped that this feeling would last.

The fiery tom got up and bent his back out in a stretch, his claws flexing in and out, crunching into the soil.

He prodded his mate in the shoulder,
"Come on. Get up" he mewed softly, sitting up straight.

The gray warrior only curled up tighter, tucking his muzzle under his paw.
"I don't want to... Whyyy?" He whined.
Fireheart rolled his eyes.
"Because, we have to get back. Our clanmates are going to wonder where we are. Also, I'm raising your kits, remember?"
Graystripe rolled over and glared at fireheart in mock-irritation, but sighed,
"Okay. I'm up." He meowed, lifting himself off the patch of grass. "But One thing. We're not telling anyone about this place. It's our spot." He mewed, pressing up against the orange tom.
"Fine. I think I can do that. But you never know, the nursery can get boring without new conversation. Anyway, best be heading off." He meowed curtly, turning around and trotting off, tail high.
Shortly after, Graystripe appeared beside him, and the two began trotting in pace.

The sun had reached halfway to its peak and they'd just crossed the border, and out of nowhere, Graystripe's fur spiked up and he recoiled for a second.
"What is-"Fireheart began, but his partner cut him off.
"Shh. I smell fear" he whispered, crouching low to the ground.
Tentatively, Fireheart stuck his muzzle in the air, and sniffed around, and as sure as the day is long, he could smell fear-scent. And not just one cat, many. Way too many.
Something was wrong.
And just then, as if on cue, not a second after he'd almost choked on the metallic taste of ThunderClan blood-scent, an ear-splitting screech sliced through the air.
The two toms' eyes met, and they immediately dashed toward the camp, heart racing in his chest, threatening to burst as they hurled themselves closer to their camp, the blood pounding in his ears, hot and afraid, and he could now detect Graystripe's fear scent laced into the rest.

They'd reached their camp in no time flat, and a raging chorus of angry hisses and pained yowls echoed through the camp walls out into the forest, and the scents that sent the anger pulsing through him was one of rivalry. One that stank of dishonor.

ShadowClan.

Why were they here? This was very outrageous. They hauled themselves through the camp entrance, brambles tearing at their flesh, and they were met with the sight of warriors clashing and blood spilling all across the camp. The carnage seemed unintelligible and patternless, so Fireheart just launched himself at the closest cat he could lay his claws on.
In less than a heartbeat he had the soft flesh of a surprised Stumpytail, -who had been swiping half-heartedly at Brindleface,- in his claws, and the warrior pinned, flailing around helplessly under his weight. The fiery warrior slashed his claws down the side of the brown tabby's soft underbelly with a satisfying tear in his skin, blood splattering against the ground, catching fur under his claws, sending the tabby mange-bag, running with his tail between his legs, screeching in pain.
"Get lost" he spat, before turning and making a beeline for the nursery, where he found an unknown warrior taunting speckletail, darting in and striking her before dashing back out, the old queen to frail and slow to protect herself. He was about to launch himself at him when he was blindsided by a massive paw slapping across his face, sending him reeling. He turned to meet the mocking gaze of Darkflower.
"A bit out of practice are we?" She taunted.
Fireheart growled and darted at her, going for her legs, but she hopped away easily.
"What's the matter? This can't be the same apprentice who led the crusade on Brokenstar surely. I see the nursery has made you soft."- She dashed at him with incredible speed, slicing at his legs as if to prove a point,
-"and slow" She finished. Fireheart almost screeched In pain.
"And pudgy. I don't know how you-" she was cut off as the full weight of Whitestorm landing on her back pushed her to the ground.
"Where have you and Graystripe been?" he yowled. Not waiting for an answer, the white warrior then in a flash of white fur, got up, grabbed her shoulders with his claws and ripped her away, sending her bowling across the hollow. She hissed in anger but dashed off nonetheless, realizing that she couldn't take them both.
All around him warriors were sending ShadowClan screaming left,

right and center, the dark clan's cats all haring toward the gorse entrance.
After the last warrior fled from the camp, Thunderclan was given a chance to breathe.
Cats all around the hollow were panting, some on their sides cleaning wounds, and Yellowfang was running around patching up the more serious wounds. he was about to head for the nursery entrance, when he saw from the corner of his eye, Tornear, Onewhisker, and Mudfur, all Windclan warriors, panting in the corner, bloody.
Padding up to them, fur bristling he confronted them.
"And you?" He demanded. The clan gathered around in scrutiny.
Mudfur stood forward.
"We had come to warm you. Shadowclan had just raided us during the night. We had only just gotten a seat with Bluestar to warn her about this unprecedented behavior by such a weakened clan, when they hit your camp." He mewed. Gasps were audible throughout the camp at the thought of more Shadowclan terror. Bluestar stepped into the center of the clearing and the whispering hushed.
"I suppose they are intent on making an enemy of both Thunderclan and Windclan. Riverclan must be made aware of this. ShadowClan is devolving back to its short-sighted ways. Even now they haven't learned. Thank you Mudfur, Onewhisker, Tornear. Tell Tallstar that he has full Thunderclan cooperation if need be."
With that, the three Windclan warriors headed back for their territory.

"Thunderclan!" She addressed every cat.
"We will not let ShadowClan's actions today move us. We will not let them win the mental battle. We are stronger and we know we are. We will start the planning of our counter strike once Tallstar gets back to me." She yowled confidently. Cats all begun cheering loudly and enthusiastically, and just like that, they went back to what they were doing before the attack.
As Thunderclan broke back into their groups, Fireheart was about to go and check on his kits when an irritating chunk of flesh stepped in front of him. He sighed.
"What is it Tigerclaw?" He asked, knowing the question.
"I want to know where you and Graystripe were last night." He demanded. Fireheart stared at him unflinching at his harsh tone.

"Out. We sent a messenger. Not like we could've known ShadowClan would do something like this." He said simply. He tried to go around him to get to the nursery, but the deputy moved over back into the way and shoved him back, sending him reeling into the dirt. His head hit a sharp rock that was jutting from the ground, forcing him to let out an involuntary squeak. *Definitely bleeding from that one,* he huffed to himself. He looked up to give the deputy a piece of his mind, but every cat was looking up, their eyes shifting from him to Tigerclaw. A look of hesitation crossed the deputy's face when he seemed to realize that it looked like he was bullying a queen. He growled under his breath and stalked away, deciding to instead skulk in the shrub aside the warriors' den. Fireheart shook his head and got up, opting for the nursery to check on the kits. He was too ashamed to admit to himself that that fall made him feel ill. As he got to the nursery, Graystripe's head appeared from inside and he pushed his way out.
"They need your comfort" he mewed, licking his mate's cheek. Fireheart ducked into the nursery and the milky scent that he'd grown so accustomed to hit him like a wave. In the corner, both Featherkit and Stormkit were huddled next to Frostfur. Upon hearing him enter the den, their wide eyes locked onto him.

"Fireheart!" they squealed and launched themselves off of the young queen at him, knocking him to the ground with their combined weight. Stonekit climbed onto his chest, clinging to him with all his strength, and Featherkit came up behind him and began tugging on his ear with her needle-like fangs.
"We missed you." She whined. Stonekit looked up too,
"Yeah were did you go?" He chimed in.
Fireheart shook his head laughing.
"Don't worry about that." he turned to Frostfur.
"I'm sorry to have just left them with you without notice. Graystripe and I, we um... needed to get out.." he trailed off with his head slightly lowered suddenly very self-conscious. She just smiled at him knowingly.
"Don't worry. I get it." She simply waved it off,
"But don't give me too much credit, it was Goldenflower who did most of the work." She mewed.
"Really? Where is she?" He mewed, noticing that Bramblekit and Tawnykit were out in the clearing pestering their father.

"She went out for a stroll in the forest." She mewed.
"Is that so? Hopefully she missed the attack. I'll have to thank her when she gets back then. Anyway"- he turned to the kits,
-"did you behave yourselves? I hope you didn't cause trouble." He mewed sternly to them.
"We promise we didn't" Stonekit began.
"Yeah super promise" Featherkit emphasized.
"We promise thiiiis much!" Stormkit reiterated, as he sat on his haunches and held his forepaws wide out, only to lose his balance and fall backward into the nest. Fireheart guessed that meant "a lot".
Frostfur came over and licked Stormkit's head,
"They were very good. You've raised angels. It seems we will have a some respectful and respect*able* warriors coming into the fold after all. Unlike *some* kits I know," she raised her voice and glared at Thornkit and Brightkit, who were chasing each other around the elders, who would never yell at them. Especially after the shock of the attack. They both looked up.
"What?" They say in unison. Their mother shook her head in exasperation, before turning to Featherkit and Stormkit.
"Alright kits, leave your mother alone now. Go play with the Hooligans" mewed Frostfur, shooing Fireheart's kits away, and they watched the two scamper off toward the other two. She then returned her attention to him, suddenly full of wonder.
"Now. Where were you and Graystripe last night? It must've been nice if you stayed the night." She began. Fireheart Just shook his head,
"I can't. I promised graystripe I wouldn't tell." He mewed. The queen frowned.
"C'mon. Don't be like that. Now, tell me, and don't spare me a single detail." She demanded lightly, a playful atmosphere once more lending its self to the nursery.
After a couple seconds of intense staring, fireheart gave in. That didn't take much.
"Oh alright. You've pulled my leg. Just don't tell Graystripe I told you this. Keep this our secret. Well let's see.. where do I begin...-"
Fireheart was cut off by a mewl from one of the kits.
"FIREHEART!" It was Stormkit's voice, sounding panicked. Without thought, he dashed out and, following the sound of his child, he found himself behind the nursery. His his body ran cold. Stormkit,

his son, was covered in blood, standing there hovering over and poking at the unmoving body of Speckletail. Her face smeared, gnarled and ravaged.
"Mama, why won't she wake up? I think she's tired. Maybe we should move her inside." He suggested so very naively. "Actually, she looks sore. Maybe Yellow-"
"Stormkit. Come here now!" He barked, panic rising and expanding in his stomach, weighing him down, his legs turned to jelly as he yanked his son from the corpse.
"Somebody get help! GET YELLOWFANG!" He screamed out ruefully, almost choking on his own voice.

——————To Be Continued————————

Chapter 11 and 12

"On this night, we pray to StarClan for Speckletail, who we lost in a gruesome and unprovoked Shadowclan raid. She was an excellent warrior and a loving mother to all. We know you'll accept her with open paws into your starry home, where she will hunt in your pastures free and lively. We celebrate her life and mourn her death. We will have fair retribution for the misdeed that has been dealt to not a warrior, but a nursing queen too old to defend herself. Thunderclan will not stand for such actions." Bluestar then gazed across the clearing.
"Goldenflower as chosen to care for snowkit, her mother's last surviving kit." To this, Goldenflower nodded. The look on her face was one of despair, and hatred. Fireheart couldn't blame her, and his heart was broken for poor queen.

Bluestar finished her prayer for Speckletail and pressed her muzzle into her fur, then licked her cheek a couple times, and moved on. Each cat took their chance to share tongues with the old queen one last time. Come sunset, Fireheart stepped forward last and decided that he'd stay vigil for her with her daughter, goldenflower. It's the least he could do after all she had done for him, as well as spending her last breaths of life protecting the nursery and all the kits inside. An honorable memory for an honorable cat.

Unfortunately after spending half the vigil wrestling with the thoughts of spite and vengeance for her death, he'd finally given in, and what was meant to be a loving goodbye, turned into a brooding session. He hated that the felt anger toward her murderer overshadowed the sadness toward her death. He prayed he'd never learn the identity of the cat who's dealt these blows, because he wasn't certain that he'd be able to control himself if he were to face off with her foxheart murderer.

So instead, Fireheart decided to respectfully leave the vigil early and go calm down in the nursery as to stop disrespecting Speckletail's body with his bloodlust, and to instead go and cuddle

with his kits.
On his way there, he'd been intercepted by his old apprentice, turned medicine cat.
"Hey Fireheart." She mewed, touching noses with him affectionately.
"Cinderpaw. What're you doing up so late?" He asked, noticing the obvious fatigue in her movements. It hadn't been an easy moon for her or Yellowfang. The old medicine cat said that some of the herbs are dying and they were not sure why.
"Well I was about to go and check on Featherkit and Stormkit on order of Yellowfang while you were at the vigil, and while they're asleep, but I see you're back early. Something the matter?" She asked? He shook his head.
"Nothing you need to worry about." He mewed.
"Welp, I guess I'll be going", She began to move off, her injured leg dragging behind her.
"Wait, Cinderpelt"- he called in a hushed tone "you check up on them now. I'm in no hurry." He mewed.
"Thanks!" Gratefulness flashed in her eyes. strange. She seemed desperate to check on them. So he sat at the entrance, staring back out at the moon and feeling the incoming Leafbare breeze flowing through the camp for a couple heartbeats, before the medicine apprentice turned her head and looked at him strangely.
"You can come in as well, furball. No point in you getting sick from sitting out in the cold." She mewed. He turned to her and shook his head.
"Oh don't worry, I was planning to." He mewed, getting up ducking into the nursery, and sat at the edge of the nest, tail folded over his paws as the medicine apprentice did her examination, sifting through their fur, checking in their ears, sniffing their breath, checking their temperature with her nose, and lastly, listening to their breathing. It's a miracle they didn't wake up. One that he welcomed with open paws.
Satisfied, she bowed her head respectfully, and he nodded back, touching noses with him in a friendly manner, and she turned around to leave.
"Wait, what about them?" He whispered, referring to Brindleface, and Frostfur, and Goldenflower's kits, Bramblekit and Tawnykit, who occupied the other three corners of the nursery. Specklepelt had had her nest in the middle for warmth, given her age.

"I'll give them their checkups tomorrow once they're awake. Best not interrupt them. I only came for your kits because I thought you were outside." She mewed distractedly, before trotting hurriedly back to the medicine cat den. With that, he shrugged and climbed into his nest where his kits were curled up and wound himself tightly around them. They were almost too big to do this anymore. A sad thought. He pressed his muzzle underneath Featherkit's chin, which was hanging over the side of the nest, and hoisted it back into the warmth of his chest. Thankfully, they didn't stir, but instead instinctively burrowed deeper into his fur, for which he was grateful. The warmth of his kits seemed to lighten his grief and hold it in the air instead of in his chest. At least for the time being.
At ease and comfortable, he shut his eyes and let sleep take him over.

End of chapter 11

Dust clouded up across the ground as Fireheart dove for a squirrel, and missing by an embarrassing margin. He growler under his breath, frustration taking hold.
He had ruined two of his hunts by breaking silence, and one because because he tripped as he dove for a mouse. He just managed to snag one mouse, and that's only because it dashed into a false den and he managed to pull it out.

"Fireheart!" He heard calling from the distance. It was Runningwind, trotting over, a vole and a thrush in his jaws.
"Hey. Uh yeah. Heh.. um" fire-pelted cat rambled, suddenly ashamed of his measly catch. Runningwind followed his gaze and then looked back at him sympathetically.
"Maybe you should get some training." He suggested abruptly.
Fireheart tilted his head, glaring at the warrior, daring him to say something wrong. Runningwind's eyes widened when he realized that what he said came across as insulting.
"N-no, that's no what I meant. What I meant is that Most queens that come out of the nursery are out of sha- practice."- he corrected himself. -"so, after being in the nursery for so long, maybe you should train with someone just to stay- keep yourself working out." He finished clumsily. Fireheart made an effort not to feel offended.

He was aware that, while the swift tabby was an expert in hunting and a force to be reckoned with to go up against in a fight, the furball could fall over his own lip trying to be social, which was sad, because he tried hard. Due to this, no one ever drilled him for saying something wrong on occasion. This just happened to be one of those.. occasions. Lucky fireheart. He sighed.
But more importantly, the more he thought about what Runningwind was saying, the more sense it made. Maybe he shouldn't be laying around like crowfood and fall back into the mix.
"So what do you mean?" Fireheart asked coolly, allowing his fur to lie flat.
"Well"- He mewed slowly and smartly, evidently choosing his words gingerly -"what if you had some cat spar with you daily, and every once in a bit, have them analyze your hunting posture. You know, just to.. stay as fine a warrior as you are." He meowed each word very carefully.
Good choice of words. He silently praised the quick warrior.
"That's.. not a bad idea. What if you did it?" Fireheart suggested, liking the sound of getting back into shape, because as much as he would've clawed Runningwind for saying it, laying around has made him a bit... pudgy, to use Darkflower's words.

"Starclan no. I'm an awful teacher and I have no patience. Why not Graystripe?" He meowed.
I don't need a teacher! Nor would you need patience to help me. He protested in his head, but sucked it up and simply nodded. As close as they were, it was clear he didn't like the idea of training with any cat, so he just smiled, touched muzzles with his friend and went on his way.

On his way back to camp, he pieced together an idea. He decided to ask Graystripe to help him with his hunting posture. It'd be nice to spend some more consistent quality time with his love, but he wouldn't work as a sparring partner because he'd inevitably go easy on him because, he could just picture how that would go *"you're the mother of my kits! How could I lay a paw on you?" Yeah, that's not going to work.* He wasn't the mother of his kits... obviously, but Graystripe's heart took the lead over his head a bit too often. He's too emotionally attached. And as Darkflower's words echoed in his head, he realized that even if his mate could bring himself to help

him, he'd never be able to teach him what he was looking to learn. He refused to have a repeat of the Speckletail debacle, so he needed a cat who could teach him something a little more effective than flailing claws. He reached the camp entrance and scanned the clearing. He had cat in mind who could train him in such savage combat. The attack from ShadowClan made everything feel far more real. It could've easily been Stormkit or Fratherkit's body laying limp in the corner. He'd do anything to protect his family, though he had a strong feeling that he'd regret it very quickly once the training had begun.. if it began at all.
"Tigerclaw!" He called out. A couple moments later the dark pelted deputy emerged from the warriors' den and headed over to him, shackles raised. He didn't blame him. Now that he was looking to this cat for assistance, he suddenly looked really big and intimidating, but that was no secret.
"What do you want?" He demanded impatiently.
He motioned for him to follow him out of the camp, and he could hear the heavy steps the an annoyed Tigerclaw.

Once they'd gotten far enough into the forest he turned around.
"I wanted to ask if you could train and spar with me." He mewed, staring up at the towering deputy.
He simply puffed with irritation.
"Hmph. You officially have bees in your brain. Stop wasting my time, kittypet." He turned to pad away.
"What if it was Goldenflower? Or Tawnykit or Bramblekit? I wasn't able to save Speckletail because I was too weak." He hissed, his words were soaked in spite and malice on Speckletail's behalf. He knew he needed to appeal to the deputy's own feelings.
The razor-clawed warrior stopped in his tracks, considering what he'd just heard. After a moment he turned around and stalked back over to fireheart, clearly interested.
"And why would I help you? Surely I'd be better posed to just train Goldenflower" He growled, less impatient than before.
"Because we both get something out of it. You teach me your way of fighting and in return you can brutally abuse me while doing it. and if you do this, I'll tell you where Graystripe and I disappeared off to if it means that much to you." He coaxed, pausing, then continuing, "And besides, why would you ever turn away the possibility of proving that I'm worse at fighting than my forestborn kits? And let's

be real, StarClan knows Goldenflower would never agree to learn any of your more... clandestine moves." He finished, shifting his weight from paw to paw in an attempt to stifle the nerves he was feeling, staring the dark tabby in his eyes, holding his gaze just barely. The warrior was clearly mulling it over, probably considering every possibility, or just imagining throwing Fireheart at a rock and calling it training.
After the long pause, the warrior nodded.
"Alright, I accept your proposal. But on one condition. When I train you we do it on my terms. And with that being said, meet me on the border by the treecut place tomorrow at dawn. But I highly doubt you could handle the kind of training I underwent." He mewed scornfully, and headed off, but turned back once more "And last thing. If you complain once, it's over. This isn't for mousehearts." He whispered hauntingly, before stalking off back to camp.
He knew this was a bad idea, but his drive to protect his kits and, though he'd never admit it, his desire to give that foxheart Darkflower a couple lacerations that she'll remember for a long time, trumped his mental zen.
But for now, he decided to turn in early. Tonight was the night of the gathering, and he'd already requested to Bluestar that he go. He wanted to hear what ShadowClan had to say for themselves. Dappletail, Oneeye, Halftail, Longtail, Whitestorm, dustpaw, Sandpaw, Tigerclaw, And Darkstipe would also be attending. Due to this deficit of warrior activity in the camp, Graystripe, who was offered a spot in the gathering, opted to stay in camp to defend it, and Fireheart promised to tell him all about it.
So, curling up, he fell asleep quickly, rebuilding his energy for what he had no doubt would be a heated, and possibly violent gathering.

End of chapter

Chapter 13

Silent greetings and hushed mews of welcome were heard whipped through the Fourtrees. Bluestar flicked her tail and the whole of Thunderclan's gathering group came padding over the ridge in one formation, taking their place in the hollow, and mingled with Windclan and Riverclan. It appeared that Shadowclan had not yet arrived. *Foxdung! If those Fleabitten frogbreaths know what's good for them, they'll stay away.* Fireheart searched for Onewhisker of Windclan. He was seated next to Mudfur, his gaze darting through the crowd of cats gathered in the hollow. When his eyes landed on Fireheart, they lit up with relief and he got up and headed over. The ThunderClan warrior met him halfway, and Mudfur brought up his rear.

"I see you decided to come. Despite everything" he meowed. To that, Fireheart hissed.
"Starclan knows I wouldn't miss this gathering for a moon of free fresh kill."

"If those mangepelts know their place. They'll keep away" he jeered.

"Funny you should say that. I was just-" he was cut off by the patter of paw steps. Pawsteps that put him in a really bad mood. Brought with it was an insulting stench. Nightstar appeared over the edge of the pine forest, followed by a small group of cats. There were so few of them here.
When they began to move down to the clearing, Thunderclan and Windclan became silent. The Riverclan warriors were visibly confused and disconcerted by the bloating tension.

"Tsk. I bet they're still licking their wounds from half a moon ago" Fireheart jeered spitefully. Mudfur snickered along with some close-surrounding hotter-headed warriors, while Onewhisker just looked on, hatred burning in his eyes.
"I hope a monster takes a few out on their way back to camp." He whispered. Fireheart was shocked by this, but he knew not the level of damage to Windclan's camp, so he didn't protest.

The leaders leaped to the top of the great rock, Bluestar's vicious gaze burning into Nightstar as he struggled up to his place. It looked as if she was contemplating pushing him off the Great Rock. Tallstar wasn't much better, but he seemed less outwardly hostile and more miserable than anything. Crookedstar's gaze shifted hazily between the three. After what seemed like a pathetic moon, old bag of bones managed to scramble to the top.

"Alright everyone, quiet! No pleasantries tonight! Let's just get right down into the meat of what everyone's thinking! Nightstar. Explain yourself." Bluestar yowled. The Shadowclan leader just stared straight ahead, so she continued. "For those unaware, Riverclan. Shadowclan made an on both ThunderClan and Windclan on two consecutive days. Normally, ThunderClan would overlook such a feeble attempt at a power grab, but you see, however, that little stunt was not without victims. Speckletail was found mangled behind the nursery. She barely had a face to say goodbye to." Bluestar continued, her voice heavy with emotion. Whispers spread quickly through the gathered cats, and Bluestar continued. "What's worse, She was not a warrior. She was a queen, a nursing queen at that. On her way to the elders den. Her kit, a strong and healthy Tom is now being suckled by Goldenflower, his own older sister! You Nightstar, truly are a disgrace." At this, some Shadowclan cats seemed uneasy. But not all.

Tallstar stepped forward, ushering in another silence.

"Ay, I am sorry for your loss, Bluestar. We, too, have mourning to attend. Mourning for an elder, and a newborn kit. Both shamelessly torn apart by Shadowclan onslaught." He huffed, his piercing voice echoing through the clearing, and bouncing through the forest. *A kit?* Silence ensued before growls of disgust and hatred spread through the clearing, i insults were hurled in every direction. Fireheart felt violently sick at the thought, as he hunched over, almost throwing up on the spot. To think that kit could have been his own. Mudfur rubbed his arched back with his tail.
"You and your clan are a disgrace" the brown warrior growled at the ShadowClan leader.
"StarClan-foresaken!" Called another, "crow-food!" Another, "mangepelt would understate it!" The insults soon filled the air,

before quieting down at Tallstar's silent command.

"So Nightstar. Do you have *anything* to say for yourself?" The leader meowed, his eyes clouded.

The Shadowclan leader stood from his place.

"We attacked you because you are weak. Brokentail helped me see that. Suddenly it's clear to me that ShadowClan has spent far too long in the dark. we are simply coming forth to claim what we deserve." Meowed simply.

Bluestar spat, her eyes icy and sharp,

"No. It is you that is weak. Furthermore foolish." Crookedstar rebutted.
Bluestar stepped forward, hissing,
"It would've been an easy endeavor to have killed your raiding party, but we didn't, because we respect life. Something your band of rogues clearly do not." A pocket of ShadowClan hissed at being called rogues. Tallstar opened his mouth once more,
"Nightstar. Your clan has proven its-self unfit to lead by the warrior code, and therefore I request that you leave the forest, and don't return. Ever." He hissed, his voice now contrast to the passion he showed just a couple moments ago, was cold and hard. Emotionless.

"And what if we don't? What if we regard you as the crowfood eating backdrops you are?" Nightstar demanded impatiently.

"Then you have war." Bluestar meowed lowly, her voice dark with foreboding.

Every cat was in shock. Bluestar had just declared war on ShadowClan.

She then looked over to the cats situated around the Great rock.

"This gathering is over!" She yowled, leaping off the rock. With a flick of her tail, she summoned her clan, and they funneled through the foliage, Angry hisses at Shadowclan prevalent, which the dark clan took without rebuttal, From every clan as they departed.

"Thunderclan, let's hurry back to camp. I have a bad feeling. Whitestorm, Darkstripe. Please lead the elders home at their pace." She ordered. Fireheart dashed back at her side, others following close behind. His heart racing in his chest. Maybe he shouldn't have left Graystripe and his kits behind. Not that he could've done much if his fight with Darkflower was any hint.

They slowed and paced themselves as they neared the camp, and listened. There was nothing. He turned to Bluestar and shook his head, and they continued to head back to the camp quietly. Gingerly, they reached to camp entrance, pushing through the gorse tunnel, and all was peaceful. Graystripe was on vigil as expected. He hurried over and traded licks with his love. "Did everything go well?" He asked. Fireheart opened his mouth to respond, but closed it again, dropping his gaze, not knowing how to answer, where to even begin, and instead dropped his head defeatedly.

"That bad huh? I should've known those slimy snakehearts wouldn't be reasoned with. Brokenstar or no Brokenstar, they never change." he growled. Fireheart didn't want to talk. Instead, moving off to the nursery, suddenly wishing that his kits were old enough to defend themselves. And yet, at four and a half moons, he still wished that they never needed to defend themselves. On that thought, he glanced around the clearing, and Tigerclaw was stalking toward the warriors' den. He turned to look back at the fiery tom, with a stoic, yet surprisingly solemn look, sharing a silent message that he understood perfectly. After this gathering, things were changing forever. Fireheart guessed even Tigerclaw recognized that the gravity of the situation superseded petty squabbles. ShadowClan managed to unite the clans against a common enemy, and in doing so, had made an enemy that they would not survive.

Tension sat in the air for those who attended the gathering, though, save for the pulsing heartbeat in their ears in anticipation of ShadowClan making a rash move, the night remained silent and sleeping, occasionally disturbed by the groan or shuffling of uncomfortable elders, their bones feeling the early leafbare chill. Similar to the kits of the nursery, who snored blissfully ignorant and completely unaware. Fireheart almost resented it if not for the account that they will have many moons of hardship to come. A

thought not much better than the former, for even under the light of resentment, it holds fast not to scrutiny under the woeful gaze of compassion, for their day will come. This much is sure. And this much alone was humbling. There was no room for loathing of self or another in this forest of secrets and tricks, and so under this guise, Fireheart lay his head down, weary and heavy.

Though through the night, Fireheart felt uneasy. In his time in the nursery, his body may have fallen out practice, but his mind was sharper than it has ever been, forged by a daily routine of detecting lying little kits, and had grown accustomed to picking up on unhappiness and anger, even when they try to hide it, as well as the raw microexpressions that reveal emotion before it is hidden behind a mask of indifference. Being a parent had taught him all of this, and pain of sitting through many tantrums and brother-sister squabbles had given him a knack for problem-solving and logical thinking, and upon remembrance of the faces of the cats at that gathering, something didn't sit right with him. The dark clan seemed particularly docile, save for their leader. Tyranny maybe? Nightstar could simply be following in the paw steps of Brokentail as he exclaimed, the estranged ruler of ShadowClan, who led the clan like a killing force throughout the forest, the same one that now, ironically resides as a hostage in the ThunderClan medicine den, blind and useless, like a dead fish. But it didn't make any sense. If Nightstar is even half-sane enough to be a leader, then he must've known that he didn't stand a chance. Surely he isn't ignorant enough to not notice how severe a tactical error making an enemy of two clans who are already closely united would be. He refused to believe that StarClan would give nine lives to an imbecile, and as such, there was still so much that they didn't know, so while Fireheart felt a burning rage for poor Speckletail, he didn't feel like it was aimed in the right direction.

But regardless of his feelings toward this matter, he had to sleep. He had his first day of training with Tigerclaw tomorrow, and as much as they disliked each other, he needed to make a good impression if the tabby deputy was to take him seriously, because united by the clan banner or not, Fireheart couldn't dictate Tigerclaw's personal feelings, no matter how logical it may seem to try. So regardless of his disdain for him for what he did to Ravenpaw, his time will

come. Tigerclaw will have retribution for his crimes against the warrior code.

For now, though, he needed the deputy's skill and combat experience. So for the time being, he will use him to better his own skills, and just hope that Graystripe doesn't mind, even though the first prize would be him not finding out at all.

END OF CHAPTER _____

Chapter 14

"Oh come on! Dont tell me you were made a warrior with a swing like that" Tigerclaw growled, easily batting Fireheart away with a hefty swipe of his massive paw, claws sheathed. The orange tom leaped back just too late, earning him a clout to the muzzle, sending him staggering.

Fireheart stood in the middle of the clearing panting as Tigerclaw circled him, looking for an opening.

"I dont see how you expect me to teach you advanced battle moves if you are so feeble in the ones that you already know" he sneered in frustration.

"Now, come at me with everything you've got, which I dont see to be a lot if what you've shown me is anything to go by." He jeered, hurling insults at any time that suited him. Fuming, Fireheart hurled himself at his make-shift mentor, thinking on his paws, he aimed to feint an attack to the legs and redirect for the deputy's muzzle, where he could get a nice blow in. He ducked, swiped one paw at Tigerclaw's right foreleg, and as the tabby prepared to counter, Fireheart drew back his forepaw, and redirected both paws for his muzzle, smacking downward, the impact forcing the deputy's face into the ground, even if only for a moment.

"Ha. hows that for feeble?" Fireheart taunted back, a sick satisfaction flowing through him at seeing Tigerclaw eat dirt.

"Lucky shot, softpaw. Try that a second time and it'll be *your* face in the ground, along with the rest of you." he huffed angrily. He was right. That wouldn't work a second time. After that little display, Tigerclaw would not be keen on understimating him to quite the same extent, so there would be no more margin for error. Though when he thought about it, that was a good thing. The harder Tigerclaw made this, the stronger Fireheart would become.

The two traded blows inconsequencially, their attack speeding up

and becoming quicker and quicker with smaller and smaller intervals, until it was blow for blow, blood rushing in ears and hisses as paws made hard contact on every strike, the scowl on Tigerclaw's face getting bigger and bigger as the swings shot back and forth became harder and harder until finally with a yowl of rage, he lobbed a massive blow to the side of Firehearts flank, sending him reeling. The ginger warrior collapsed in a single graceless motion, hitting the ground with a bellowing thud.

When he tried to lift himself up to save face, it hurt everywhere. He could suddenly feel every one of those traded blows come crashing back to him, and judging by Tigerclaws awkward stance, so could he. The fiery tom just lay there panting, wheezing, and workng up the strength to stand.

After a moment, Tigerclaw looked down at him, his gaze revealing nothing,

"That will be all for today. Take a break for the next two days and practice. Not bad for a nursery-belly" he sneered. Fireheart jolted at what he could only guess was a jab,
"a what-" but the warrior spoke over him,
"Next training session, I'd better see you start off with the brutal fighting spirit that you had near the end of this session, not the mouse who I saw at the beginning." he huffed, glancing back at the orange tom, a glint in his eye as he padded off that Fireheart couldn't quite decypher.

Was that a compliment? Fireheart pondered to himself for a second. He never thought he'd ever hear Tigerclaw acknowledge his fighting spirit.

On that thought, he pulled himself to his paws followed Tigerclaw back to camp, keeping a respectable distance.

When he reached the camp, he immediately headed for the nursery, only to stop in his tracks to the sight before him. his kits at four and a half moons old, playing warrior and rogue with Bramblekit and Tawneykit, who were now five moons old. He decided to take a wide angle around, and went and sat under the solid shade of the fern near the warriors' den, and watched as his kits played.

"They sure do grow up don't they?" Frostfur had entered the camp and sat next to him, a mouse in her jaws.

"Yeah. Too fast, if you ask me. I wish that they could stay small forever. I can't imagine them fighting with other clans for survival." he mewed, shivering at the remembrance of the gathering the night before.

"That is true. But, can I tell you something? I think that you made an excellent mother. You've raised them to be both boisterous and respectful at the same time. An impressive feat if you ask me." she mewed.

"Hey now, you didn't do too badly yourself. How are your two's apprenticeships going? I hear Whitestorm and Longtail are not messing around. Drilling them hard." Fireheart meowed, his gaze locking on to the two young apprentices lazing in the sun, then turning back to the queen, and he saw her eyes lit up at the mention of her kits.

"Oh they're so excited about every new thing they learn. They show me everything. Between you and me, I think Thornpaw is far more focused, but I also believe Brightpaw could be doing more for her training. I think Swiftpaw is distracting her a bit." She meowed, seeming slightly bothered by it.

"Young love. What a strange and wonderful thing. You shouldn't worry about it too much Frostfur." Oneeye huffed, stretching, and exiting the elders' den in preference of the sunny spot near Fireheart and Frostfur.

"I know, but I just dont want her to go through what snowfur did." she mewed.

"Who?" fireheart asked. Oneeye turned to him,

"Bluestar's late sister and Whitestorm's mother. She had kits so soon after becoming a warrior that she didn't get to enjoy her youngest free years, and instead spent it cooped up in the nursery. Bless her soul and curse her mate." she mewed.

"What happened to her?" Fireheart asked, almost whispering.

"Whats that? You know I can't hear so well. please speak up." Oneeye yowled.

"What happened to her!" Fireheart mewed louder this time, straining himself toward her.

"Oh that! Well. Sadly, she was killed by a monster on the ShadowClan border. No one knows how it happened except Bluestar, who saw it happen. Left wWhitestorm behind in the nursery. Bluestar mothered him from then on, after ignoring him because she couldn't handle it." she finished with a little jab at their leader.
So that's why she seems to have an affinity toward Whitestorm. He thought to himself. He always thought she seemed a tad warmer to the white warrior than many others.

"Oh hush now Oneeye. Can you imagine losing your mother on your first battle as an apprentice and your sister who has a kit, and then your *own* kits? Must be awful." Frostfur sympathised.
Fireheart has already heard about Bluestar's kits, how they disappeared mysteriously, and on practically the eve of their deaths, Bluestar was made deputy.

Fireheart opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by squealing. Shook, he spun around, his shackes high, but amusemnt took over as quickly as the panic disappeared at the sight before him. Graystripe in all his glory, dashing across the camp, Featherkit diving for his tail, a predatory glint in her eye, Stormkit not far behind, seemingly trying to cut him off when he reached the ravine wall.

"It's nice to see an attentive father every once in a while. you've got a good one there" Oneeye meowed happily, flicking Fireheart's flank with her tail, before heading off to lay woth patchpelt in the sun.

Fireheart half-nodded his head, but didn't take his eyes off of the three hooligans. His emotions hit him like a lump of stone against his chest, and his heart swelled with love for the two toms and his little daughter, who more than made up for her small size with her

energy.

He just sat there and watched, opting to let Graystripe have his time to bond with his children. Time doesn't come as easily as it used to, what with the constant border patrols for any possible threat from the clan that seemed less than happy at the moment. Tucked away in amongst the deepest crevices of his mind, he found the horrible thought of what were to happen if ShadowClan caught them off guard one night with the same killing intent that they had a half a moon ago. The horrifying image of his mate in the same bloody mess as Speckletail flew through his mind, spawning a worm of anxiety in his belly, and disappeared as quickly as it came. He shivered at the thought. He couldn't allow that to happen. All this did was solidify his conviction to learn as much from Tigerclaw as he could, in as little time as he could. On that thought, he heaved himself up off the ground and headed straight for the deputy, who lay on his lonesome, watching his son and his daughter playing on the other side of camp, behind the rough exterior, a look of longing barely present, but still there.

As he opened his mouth to call to him, Bluestar pushed through into the camp, followed by Whitestorm and Dustpelt, her expression dubiously blank, and her frame lax with fatigue. She had been nonstop commuting from Crookedstar to Tallstar all day, trying to fall onto some common term for alliance.
However, that wasn't his business. He wasn't even a warrior at this point in time, never mind a senior warrior. He just hoped that they managed to work something out before someone does something rash.

But back on track, he looked back at Tigerclaw, and giving it a second, he made himself known.

"Um, Tigerclaw. I would like to train again tomorrow at the same time." He meowed assertively. Over the time he's known the deputy, he's noticed that this cat favors assertiveness over politeness. After a moment, the deputy tore his eyes from his kits, and looked up at his 'apprentice'.

"No can do. You need to let your body heal for a day before training again. That training was the most violent and physically taxing

thing that you've done in four moons. Nursery-belly, remember? I'm not saying this because I really care what happens to you. I'm saying this because when I do a job, I do it right, and the right way is me telling you to rest." He meowed, then after a moment, followed it up with "But like I said, I don't really care what happens to you, and if you were to die of exhaustion, that would make my life a whole lot easier, so I don't care to enforce that rule." he said in a prickly fashion, but Fireheart saw a slight shift in his attitude, if only for a moment. Either way, Fireheart wasn't going to think to much about it. It was just Tigerclaw being Tigerclaw, plus, he didn't want to press this particular cat. However, when he looked back at him, he noticed that he was looking back at his kits.

"You know, if you really want to go play with them, you should. If you don't act like a father to them, then they'll never see you that way, just a deputy that never wants anything to do with them. And besides, you never know when will be the last time you see them." Fireheart mewed boldly. The deputy looked up at him, not with hostility, but with hesitant irritation.

"It seems that you're soft in more than just the paws and your belly, kittypet." he snorted, but his shoulders slumped slightly, even if it wasnt on purpose. Fireheart knew that he'd said something right. Even if the tabby refused to verbally acknowledge it, he knew he was thinking about it.

And the same goes for the Tigerclaw as it does for Fireheart. "I don't care about you in any way, just so we're clear. Your kits, however, I do." He amended after a moment. The deputy just tried to suppress chuckle, "Naturally. Nursery-cat." He meowed, then sighed melodramatically.
Whatever reason he may have, it wasn't good enough to not even make his presence known to them. He turned to head back to his original vantage point, but couldn't help glancing back at the deputy, who was now staring at the ground. Fireheart couldn't help but wonder what was going through his mind now. Not even the toughest warriors can shrug off an emotional wound, no matter how stoic.

Looks like I've caught you off guard for the second time in one day. He thought to himself, turning to go admire the show of his mate's and

kits' bonding session. As he watched them tussle, and hop away, jump on top of one another, he was slowly lulled to sleep by their excited voices.
He hoped that some cat would carry him back to the nursery, because he really needed this sleep.

END OF CHAPTER

Chatper 15

"Let every cat old enough to catch their own prey gather around the highrock for a clan meeting." Bluestar yowled, and bodies slithered from every corner of the camp and situated themselves around her as she leaped to the top of the highrock.

Once every cat was seated, staring intently at the subject of the commotion, she opened her mouth,
"As you know, we have an infestation of ShadowClan scavengers who think they can push us around. Now, we are all aware that they don't stand fox claw's sliver of a chance against us, especially in this state, but I have had time to think, and some.. consulting, with some of you" -she glanced at Fireheart. To this he recalled explaining to her that he didn't think all was as it seemed. He said it was a gut feeling, but for whatever reason, she held faith in his instincts. It was nice to see that she listens to the rest of the clan.
-"and I have decided that instead of raiding their camp, I will be taking a party to Tallstar's camp so we can discuss investigating this in more detail.
Whitestorm, Longtail, you will accompany me. That is all." She finished, leaping off the rock, and turning toward the exit. To this, Fireheart gave himself a couple of satisfied licks to the chest.

He led himself back to his den, where two eager kits were waiting for him.

"What was that all about?" Stormkit asked, wide-eyed, to which Fireheart shook his head and slumped slightly at the prospect of not being chosen to go, even thought it was his idea. However, he had to remember that there was a good reason he'd never be picked for something like this for the next one-and-a-half moons. He suddenly felt slightly depressed.

"Nothing to worry about darling. Bluestar is just making sure you and everyone else is safe." He meowed to his kit, turning to head back into the nursery.

"Fireheart" Stormkit meowed, his sister silent beside him, to which he ignored them "thats the end of this conversation." he cooed -"Fireheart.." he kept trying to cut in and Fireheart kept ignoring "I need to rest, darling." "Fireheart!" His kit called even louder. Still he couldn't muster the energy to turn and talk to his kit, "Mother!" He yelped. Fireheart stopped in his tracks. The distress in his sons voice snapped Fireheart back into reality. Now, he was a little sheepish at the little episode. He turned to face his kits, this time it was his turn to be wide-eyed.

"We're not little kits anymore. Please stop treating us like newborns." Stormkit mewed crossly, but Fireheart knew that he sounded more brave than he felt, if the shaking was anything to go by. Fireheart felt hollow with the realisation that his kits weren't little anymore. A throng that he'd been trying to avoid for a little while. With a heavy sigh, he beckoned them over with his tail. They came scampering over. He pulled them in for a warm embrace, staring at the floor, then looking them both in the eyes and sighed. Featherkit had her eyes half closed, purring at the warmth, but Stormkit was staring at him expectantly. He'd grown so much from the nervous kit that his sister used to push around. Fireheart sucked in a breath, about to admit something that he hoped he'd never have to admit.

"You're right. You're not. You have grown to be brave, kind, wonderful cats, and I'm so proud of you both." He stopped for a second to wonder when had Stormkit come out of his shell to become so bold and brave. To this he felt a pang of guilt, as he realised that with all of his focus on protecting and teaching them, he had hardly taken the time to watch them grow and progress and become the sterling young warriors-to-be that sat in front of him now. What hurt the worst, was that he'd never get to rewind and do it again. With a thud to his chest, he felt like a failure. He couldn't stop the hurt from shining through, and his kits frowned. Stormkit hurriedly jumped forward.

"I-I'm sorry I didn't mean-" he cut him off,

"No. I'm the one who's sorry. I realise that I haven't been there for you all the times that I should've. You *are* right. Never apologise for being right just because someone doesn't like it. I need to come to

terms with the fact that you are growing up faster than I'd like. I have to start treating you like grown cats at some point. Let me start here."

Fireheart led them back to the nursery entrance, sat them back down and began explaining premise of their feud with ShadowClan, sparing them the gruesome details of cats slaughtering each other in the name of territory and prey, then began to explain to them how he and Graystripe had brought WindClan back from exile, and the close friendship that ThunderClan had shared with them since, perhaps inflating his mate's actions and making him seem more heroic than he actually was, and told them how ThunderClan and WindClan were now protecting each other from possible harm from the volatile clan, and emphasising that part about Bluestar and Tallstar investigating for more clues as to why they're acting this way, leaving out the part about it being his idea in the first place. He thought that he'd inflated his children' image of them enough for one day.

"But I don't get it. Why would they hurt us if we helped them get rid of Brokenstar? Thats mean and uncalled for." Featherkit complained.

"You're right it is mean. And very uncalled for, but you have to remember that we *don't know* why. That's why we are investigating before attacking and hurting them back" he explained to his Daughter. She still seemed a little cloudy-eyed, but Stormkit seemed to understand perfectly.

"Well, I can't wait to be the strongest warrior ever and protect you and Graystripe and guard the camp every night and show them why they should never mess with us, and give them some claw-marks to help them remember." He mewed, and Fireheart fixed him a stern look. "Hehe. *if* it's their fault." He corrected, and Fireheart nodded his approval, smiling.

"Good save" Featherkit whispered over her laughter.

"I'm sure you'll be a fierce warrior who'll defend the clan and fill the fresh kill pile everyday, but remember, until then, you're still my kits, and I have free-reign over you" he said, jumping up and

leaping at the two like a badger. "ROAR!!"

They scattered, joyful squeals echoing through the ravine.

Nightfall came soon, and as did the chill.

Leafbare was becoming more and more real.

With each sundown that came, the ground under them became more and more freezing. Fireheart passed by the elders' den, he heard the chattering of teeth, and the crinkling of leaves as the elders shivered each time a breeze blew down the ravine, and passed through the camp, and settled at the bottom of the cove. He pushed into the den with extra moss and draped it over them, one after the other in the hopes that it might ease the pangs.

It felt good to help around the camp. Even though he wasn't a warrior anymore, he could still help the clan, and as the days got worse, his help would be more and more needed and appreciated.

Now for the kits. He grabbed the remained of his dry moss-bundle and trotted back to his den, and when he pushed through the entrance, the warm, milky scent washed over him, instantly calming him. He then pushed closed the shrubbery in the entrance, an idea that Graystripe had for keeping out the cold air and keeping in the warm air.

Everyone was sleeping soundly, their breath coming in slow, heavy puffs. He slunk around, padding moss over kits in the den, and then padded quietly over to his nest, draping a layer of moss over his kits, curled tightly around them and let sleep take him as his shivers calmed down.

The next morning, he stepped out of the den, and entered the clearing to rumbling bellies. He could empathise with this. The fresh kill pile was even more barren this day as it was the day before, and everyone was getting hungrier, him included; The kits included; The elders included; Warriors were stalking around, grumbling at one another. Empty bellies were making everyone grumpy. He scanned the clearing and Longtail and Runningwind were glaring at each other, and Sandstorm and Darkstripe were

hissing over a tough, leathery old mouse. It looked especially unappetising, though he found his belly grumbling upon glancing at it, but he wasn't going to get between *those* two to get it. They were welcome to have at it.

"I'm headed out" he meowed to Whitestorm who was standing guard. He nodded and shifted out of the way. Fireheart wanted to go hunting. Leafbare was the worst possible time for him to let his hunting go lax, and although he was far stronger and quicker thanks to his constant training with the deputy, he wasn't so naive as too think that would be enough to keep up with the strong hunters like Runningwind and Brindleface, and although he was pretty confident that he could take any of them in a fight at any time, that wasn't much help if everyone starved to death before he could strut his stuff, and for this reason, he needed to feed everyone.

Trekking through the forest lightly covered in snow, every step was a cold shock until he went numb to the feeling. He didn't realise that the snow was this heavy, since the ravine is decently protected from the elements. A fact that he suddenly appreciated now more than ever and he found himself wishing for the warm nursery. It felt like unearned privilege that he could simply turn back and go to sleep if he wanted to, and no cat would bat an eye. He felt like he was wasting energy just *shivering.* So this was why Tigerclaw insisted on training in one of the grooves in the ravine behind the camp. It was spacious, warmer than *this*, and pretty deserted, since nothing lived there. Maybe a badger could've found a home here many moons ago, but no sign of anything at this point. The rock floor hurt his paws at first, but after the first ten sessions, his pads roughed up to the hard surface, and no numbing cold to ache his paws whenever he knocked a claw.

This however, was utterly miserable. Absolutely, horrendously hyperborean. Every step felt like bitter needles jabbing him in the paws, sending shivers through him every other moment, and the gusts chilly wind didn't help at all. What in its right mind would be out in this? Obviously the critters had more sense than them, as only a worm brain would willingly spend their time up here instead of curled up in its nest. But here he was, and he wasn't leaving

without prey in his jaw. But, of course, every paw step sent crunches echoing through the forest, bouncing off the trees. So thinking fast, he dived into a bush, padding tentatively across steady sticks, avoiding snow. He headed toward the fourtrees, he stopped every now and then, sniffing, listening, tasting. Sniffing, listening, tasting... There! The faint, but warm scent of vole, licked his senses, before fading. He dashed forward, chasing down the source, and as he made his way forward, the scent became stronger, and more tantalising, the whiff slipping over and around his tongue, almost eliciting drool. He instinctively slowed down as the scent became constant and close enough to track, and he slid down into a cunning hunter's crouch, slithering forward, and toward the object of his attention. His prey.

As he got to the tip of a rise, he peaked over the crest and spotted the brown fur of the little water-mouse. Fireheart focussed in, stepping closer slowly, keeping his scent downwind, and almost lost his temper as the wind threatened to change direction. Staying out of his prey's line of sight, he stalked toward the meal, and a meal for his children. He'd managed to get a tail length from the oblivious creature by using the logs for cover, and with a vicious pounce, he killed it without invoking any alarm screech. He stared for a couple heartbeats at his kill with satisfaction before picking it up to her back to camp. As he was about to turn tail and head away, his ears pricked with alarm at a strange twig snap thunderpath direction, before a "shhh.." Voiced softly,

"Don't you dare get us caught" another Cat hissed.

"If Nightstar finds out about this, he'll have our heads. You know he's on a tight leash. He's told us he doesn't want to disappoint *him*" The voice came again. What were they saying? They made it sound like Nightstar was taking orders from someone else. Hostile takeover? A coup? To this, Fireheart lept out of the shrubbery, Hissing and spitting.

"What are you doing on our territory" he demanded, lashing his tail threateningly. In front of him were two skinny tabby cats that he couldn't recognise. A she-cat and a tom.

"Great, look what you've done. Now we Have to kill someone. What

a drag."

The she-cat muttered to the tom, unsheathing her claws and stalking toward the flame coated warrior queen. Fireheart's eyes widened in shock. *What?*

Chapter 16

Fireheart backed up, his legs shaking.
"What's going on?" He hissed. The tabby tom turned to the she cat with a numerous glint.
"Look Bruno, it's scared. Maybe we should talk to it" he meowed."
He mewed.
"Mac be careful. Look at his shoulders He's small, but I bet my next meal he's stronger than he's letting on. This is so awkward because now that he's seen us we can't let him go, or else he'll tell the others, and we can't have that. This makes me sad. I would much rather talk to him and pick at his brain than squish it. Honestly though he doesn't look very talkative anyway, are you?" She meowed, turning her head to him with a saddened expression.
For a second, Fireheart didn't budge, but he quickly realized that he'd be putting himself in serious danger if he didn't stall, at least until he could figure something out.
"Umm. Of course I'd like to talk. Talkative mouse. That's me. Heh."
He didn't think he sounded convincing at all, but it seemed to do the trick, because the insane, quirky, possibly not-all-there in the head looking she-cat's expressions brightened.
"Great! This is so great! Isn't that great? Fang doesn't usually let us talk to our prey before we kill." She looked at Fireheart with a sad face, and his blood turned to ice. *Their prey? What kind of sick cat is this?*
But he couldn't worry about that right now. He needed to stall for time to figure out what to do next.
"So... what you want to talk about?" Fireheart pondered nervously.
She sat in silence for a moment.
But after a few agonizing seconds, opened her mouth,
"Sorry. Not very good at this. Don't usually get this far... hmmmmm..mmmm...hmm. Okay here's a question. What do you like do for fun around here? I'm bored! Ever since we got here it's been nothing but patrolling." she whined, stretching in emphasis of her inclination to just sleep.

"Umm, well I like to hunt, lay on the Sunningrocks, talk to my cl-" he cut off at a jolt, realizing that if this cat didn't know anything about his clan, then he should probably keep it that way. If he could anyway.
"Sunningrocks? That sound *amazing* right now. If it has anything to do with sun and laying on a rock, I'd be totally down. I could use a nap." The cat named Bruno meowed, stretching again.
Her friend quickly interjected though. He seemed to be the sane of the two.
"Um Bruno. This probably isn't the best time to get sidetracked. Fang would literally kill us if he found that we went and fell asleep on the job" the cat that he assumed was Mac hissed.
Bruno thought for a second.
"Yeah he's right. well I'm sorry orange cat, but I'm gonna have to kill you now. Not that I want to or anything, it's just like, you telling anyone would be bad for us and stuff, and we don't want more work or complications. You understand right?" She meowed, approaching him with claws unsheathed. He felt his hope shatter there and then. Fireheart backed up, panic setting in once more. *How do you reason with someone you don't see as more than prey?* He needed to think of something to diverge her attention. He needed to get her attention off of him and onto herself. After panicked ideas raced through his mind at a million a second, he decided on one as the She-cat came to within a whiskerlength of his face.
"What about family? Or friends? Do you have any? I'd love to meet them!" He yelled out, letting his panic slip for a second before he composed himself and gave her the most interested face he could muster. *Even this foxheart must have family*. She looked back at Mac for a second and opened her mouth, her eyes suddenly shining, Fireheart guessed from the opportunity to run her mouth.
"Oh yeah! You don't know anything about me. I make a friend and the first thing I think of is killing him. I'm really bad at this sorry, yeah I have a Brother and a father, but my mother ran away. Didn't like Fang one bit, nope. Not even a little." She meowed. *Fang*. He kept hearing her say that name.
"So who's Fang?" He asked, fearing he already knew the answer but stalling is stalling, and he needed the time.
"Oh he's our leader. he's also reeaally scary and dangerous. One time he took a cat's head and.." her voice faded from his mind and he looked around for an escape. He could just run, but he didn't

know how fast they were. For all he knew they could be far faster and stronger than they looked, and judging by her sick humor and casualty over death, willing to do far worse to him than he was to them. He was sure they were dangerous, and while he could probably take one of them, he didn't think he'd be able to beat two dirty fighters at the same time..
"-And that's why no ones ever challenged Fang for leadership. We never wanna a spine bend the way it did ever again." She seemed to finish her thought.
Fireheart never heard what she said, but he needed to say something in response. He didn't want her losing interest in him so quickly so out of desperation he let on some about his personal life. And he knew she would have to find the story of two tom mates and adopted kits at least somewhat interesting. Unless that was normal where she was from, in which case that would be the biggest "eat foxdung" from StarClan.
"I have a mate!" She didn't look impressed, so he pressed "He's the absolute nicest cat you'll ever meet." at this she took a step back and stared in amazement.
"Wait? Huh? He? Wow that's amazing I didn't know that cats could do that!" She yelled, her excitement rising. She was a weird one. Terrifying, but weird.
"Yeah and we have two kits." He finished, and like he expected, he didn't get an emotional reaction, but she seemed twice as excited and ten times as interested.
"Wow that's crazy. I didn't know two toms could... y'know." She trailed off the implication.
"Well, no, their mother died and we adopted them. But still." Fireheart clarified.
Her next words, however, threw Fireheart off balance. "I've never heard of two toms being together and raising kits. Does Starclan approve?" She meowed.
He was taken aback. Not because of the question, as he knew that his ancestors could care less who he fell in love with.
But.. *Starclan?* This cat cares for the warrior ancestors approval? A massive rock just dropped into Fireheart's stomach and seemed to try to drag him to the ground.
"Hello? Anyone home?" She waved her paw in front of him.
He didn't react. He couldn't. It was all he could do not to fall over as he stared in shock. These cats...

These rogue, murderous monsters believed in Starclan?
"H-how do you...?"
Who were they really? Suddenly everything just got a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter 17

"Are you just going to stare into space?" Bruno meowed, But Fireheart's head was spinning.
"Hey, how do know about St-" he was cut off by the sound of Sandstorm yowling
"It's coming from this way! Hurry!" She called to her patrol, and their pawsteps through the coarse undergrowth became louder as they approached.
"Aww foxdung. Oh well, what can you do. See you later Orangepelt. Come on Mac, let's get out of here." And with that they hopped through the bramble bushes and like that they were gone, back into ShadowClan territory. "I told you to just kill.." And their voices faded away into the distance. Fireheart released a breath he didn't know he was holding onto, falling to a crouch, panting in relief.
"Fireheart!" Sandstorm burst through the leafy wall of the shrubs, circling him.
"Are you alright? We were patrolling and heard the commotion. Which way did they go?" She asked, while Runningwind and Frostfur circled around sniffing. Darkstripe's eats were pricked, listening for anything out of the ordinary.
"They went this way" Runningwind interjected.
"Fireheart, what happened?" Sandstorm meowed. Fireheart shook his head from his daze and walked them through what had just happened.
"How strange" Darkstripe commented. "Could they be new ShadowClan?" He asked.
"Yeah and hedgehogs fly" Runningwind went off.
"ShadowClan are in a bit of a state, but even they wouldn't act in such a heinous manner. Surely." Fireheart cut in.
"Hmm, I wouldn't be so sure about that. But either way, they don't smell like ShadowClan anyhow. Must be an intruder, but you won't catch me volunteering to risk my pelt going to ShadowClan camp to warn them." Darkstripe cut back in, sniffing around.
The rest us them murmured their grim agreement briefly before they rushed for the camp.
They had pushed through the camp entrance and Sandstorm headed

to Bluestar's den to report, while Fireheart visually sorted through his clanmates to find a gray pelt. *Hmm.* There. He just pushed his way out of the nursery.
"There you are!" He pelted over and brushed against Fireheart.
"Graystripe." He purred. He made every effort to suppress his shock and stop shivering. The last thing he needed was to let his stress spread to the nursery. The camp did not need hysteria. Instead, he chose to breathe in his mate's scent and take a moment to forget his own mortality.
"So what happened out there? The patrol's fur seems pretty ruffled."
He, for the second time, explained the events that played out this morning.
"Mouselegs Fireheart! What's with you and getting into trouble?"
Graystripe meowed, fussing over him, licking his ears furiously.
"Quit it furball" Fireheart shied away from his affectionate mate.
"I'm sorry, I'm just concerned. How is it that you manage to get into a tricky situation whenever I'm not around?"
Fireheart shrugged sheepishly.
"It's a talent I guess" he mewed. Just then, he jumped at Sandstorm tapping his shoulder with her tail.
"Bluestar wants to see you" She mewed.
"Hmm. I had a feeling she would."
But as he tried to turn away,
"Oh and Fireheart!" He turned back to Graystripe once more.
"What is it?" He asked.
"you do have kits hey? I just thought you needed a reminder." He meowed from across the camp. Wordlessly, Fireheart turned from him and stalked along to Bluestar's stone den, a spark of hot embarrassment tagging along under his pelt. He felt like he was carrying everyone's gaze with him as he hurried along. It made him want to crawl into himself and disappear. He knew where his mate was coming from, had been growing distant from his kits. He thought he was simply giving them space to grow like he said he would, but common sense said that there was a middle ground that he wasn't hitting, but he was shocked to be reprimanded by Graystripe in the middle of camp with everyone listening. At the same time though... *Arg! I'm so bad at this!* He scolded himself. Then he paused at the the entrance to the den. But he just couldn't get over how nonchalantly his mate just publicly humiliated him like that. Resentment suddenly struck his mind. *How is this fair? I'm the*

one who tends to them everyday. I clean them, I feed them, I put them to bed. All Graystripe does is play with them! How dare his mate complain when all the work has been thrown to Fireheart? He grumbled to himself as he pushed through the vine-curtain into his leader's den. He'd deal with this issue later, both bettering himself and giving a furball a piece of his mind.

But in the now, there was his leader, sitting in the dark, only her eyes barely visible, reflecting the little light that slipped through the thick vine mesh.
"Fireheart. Sit."- She mewed. -"And tell me what happened."
This really was getting old, explaining it over and over. Wasn't Sandstorm supposed to relay this? And so he told her what had happened.
"Hmm I see." Her eyes darkened. "Could this be what the prophecy speaks of?" She asked. Fireheart was taken aback by this theory. He hadn't even thought of that. To tell true, he had actually forgotten about the prophecy altogether for a while.
"Balance?"
He asked.
"Is a light supposed to balance out a 'shadow?' Is ShadowClan getting *too* shadowy? And that still doesn't explain there's too much light somewhere. I don't get it." He mewed, shaking his head in confusion, nearly whacking it against a crag in the den.
"Yea, well I've been thinking. I have a theory, but I'm not so sure about it just yet." She meowed tentatively, before shaking her head as though to clear it. "Never mind. Sorry to bother you for so long. You may go now." She mewed, her eyes clearing up cheerfully, and shooed him away with her tail.
"Okay okay!" he yowled and leaped out, leaving her to her thoughts. As he stepped out of the den, he felt a chill in the breeze, and when he looked around, white dots began falling all around them, as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.
"It's snowing!" He heard Featherkit squeal. "Stormkit it's snowing!" Fireheart chucked at his daughter's enthusiasm. He headed for the moss pile, bundled a tight ball of it and crept over to the nursery, before jumping out from behind the brush.
"Stormkit!" He yowled and tossed the ball of moss. This time it was Stormkits turn to squeal with surprise as the ball of soft moss hit him in the face. He he lifted his paw over his head and batted it

back as hard as he could, giggling and bubbling with excitement.
"Just wait. When I'm a warrior you'll never beat me at moss ball!" He shouted as the moss stopped at Fireheart's paws.
"I'm sure you're right" he praised his son earnestly. He looked over to Featherkit and noticed that she was far more enthralled with the snow falling to care about moss ball. This was their first leafbare after all, and Fireheart silently thanked StarClan for waiting till his kits were this old and hardy to let the snow fall, whether or not they actually had that power. So he beckoned Stormkit over and pointed to Featherkit, who was pouncing on falling snow
"Let's go keep your sister company. Come on" he whispered. And so the two bounded over to where she was and started pouncing at snowfall. Featherkit let out a surprised giggle when she saw them. This was what he imagined when he thought about having kits. This perfect moment. So kind, and so joyful. Nothing's better than this. It wasn't long now before these kits would be apprentices working to make the clan stronger, and while Fireheart dreaded the thought of the harm that could come, he relished the thought of them succeeding and making a name for themselves, and for them to get out there, free of the camp boundaries. The prophecy has time, but these kits will be out of here sooner than he can blink, so right now there's no time like the present to be with them before they're all busy with their own thing. However, though he wasn't stricken, he still couldn't shake the thought of Bruno's face. Was she really planning to murder him? It all felt kind of surreal.

Just then, Graystripe entered the camp, saw the fun and immediately attempted to join in on the action.
It's now or never. He thought to himself. Fireheart stopped the ball.
"You kits play, I need to talk to your father." He meowed, a little too angrily he realized when he saw his daughter's face turn to mischief.
"Ohh, dad's in trouble!" Featherkit called. Graystripe hesitated,
"What?" He frowned. Fireheart looked away,
"No he's not. Well, he is but- no, just get back to your game. We'll be done in a moment. And you" he pointed at his mate "come with me."
The gray warrior gulped and followed him out of the den. *No turning back.*

"I'm nervous Fireheart. Getting severe deja vu here." His mate called out from behind as he found a secluded spot. Then he rounded. *Be kind. Be kind. Be kind.*
"Okay look. Before I say anything, you know I love you, right?" He started, sitting on his haunches. Graystripe seemed to get the message and did the same, so they were facing each other.
"Of course I do." He sputtered. Fireheart continued,
"And you know that I know that you love our kits just as much as I do?" He mewed. Graystripe looked at him funny.
"Of cour- Fireheart, what is this about? You're scaring me now." He fumbled over his words.
Fireheart took a deep breath, organized his thoughts and spoke softly.
"What you said today, it felt really unfair. It really hurt me. Reminding me that I have kits to take care of? That was low." As he spoke, his frustration pushed to the surface, but he bogged it down.
"It hurt because I'm the one saddled with feeding them, Cleaning them, getting them to sleep, laying awake all night when they *won't* sleep, teaching them and, and-" he cut himself off. "I- nevermind, I'm being selfish. I'm sorry-" He suddenly felt small. He tried to turn back and head to camp, his chest aching and weighing his muscles down, eyes to the floor. But as he did, he bumped into a mass.
"Wait." He heard Graystripe's voice. He looked up to see his mate staring at him, concern in his eyes.
"No, this is silly and kit-like. I shouldn't complain when you have to hunt and patrol all day while I stay at camp." he mumbled.
"I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have said what I said. It was stupid and selfish and mean and so very — what does Featherkit like to say... uncalled for. It was a terrible thing to say and I should never make feel you like you're being a bad parent." He ended in a whisper. Fireheart stared at him and feebly reached for words or reciprocal comfort, but there were none. Everything Graystripe said was exactly how he felt.
Instead he just sat back down.
"It just... my chest just felt so sore when you said that." He whimpered, allowing his tail to flop down and stop pretending to be peppy. "I try my best everyday and sometimes I get it wrong, I know. But when you said what you said... I felt so small. And humiliated, that you said that in the middle of camp for everyone to hear. We're supposed to be a team and... I don't know... it was like...

you betrayed me.." He sniveled, unable to meet the gaze of the one cat he was supposed to trust more than anyone.
"Oh, honey, I... I have no words." He mewed, his voice thick with regret. He pressed against Fireheart's side, encasing him in gray fluff. "I'm so sorry. I really am. Just know that I didn't mean anything by it. It was stupid and misdirected. You are the best and only mother for our kits. I'd never have anyone take your place. I love so you much. And if I step out of line again, feel free to flay me." He purred, lapping at Fireheart's cheek.
"Okay you oaf. I'll remember that" he whispered, purring into Graystripe's neck. He then stared down at the ground for a moment before looking back up. "And for the record, of those kits are ever silent enough for me to forget I have them, it'll be a dream come reality." He mewed jokingly and they both *mreowed* in laughter.

The two of them padded side by side back to camp.
When they got back, Stormkit was still busy playing moss with Tawnnykit and Branblekit, but Featherkit was sitting at the entrance waiting. When she spotted them she scampered up, "Sooo? Did you get in trouble?" She pried.
"No he-" Fireheart began, but Graystripe cut him off, "I did something silly and your mother needed to tell me not to do it again. But he took me out of camp so I wouldn't feel embarrassed. Do you know why?" Fireheart felt sheepish at this display that could be mistaken for overly gratuitous if not for the fact that he knew Graystripe so well. This was absolutely earnest. "Because your mother is the best." He meowed, licking Featherkit's forehead. Then he whispered something unintelligible into her ear. The two looked at each other, at him and nodded. *Now I'm nervous.* He thought to himself. Just then the two dove at him will full force, knocking him over and wrapping him in a ball of fur and purrs.
"I love you, mom" Featherkit whispered. "You're also cooler than dad" she addded with a giggle, "hey! I didn't tell you to say that, you rascal. Come here!" He chased her around Fireheart, getting tangled once again, resulting in another collapse filled with giggling. It was only in a moment that Fireheart noticed a ball of kit barreling at them full-speed
"I'm coming in!" He heard Stormkit call as he leapt on top of them, landing with a giggle, and the four just lay there in a giggling mess.
"New rule." Graystripe spoke up. "Always tell someone if you're

feeling sad, or angry. Or if there's anything you want to say. But do it respectfully."
"Yes dad!" The two said in unison, and Fireheart just smiled and giggled at them.
Indeed.

END OF CHAPTER

Epilogue

"*Stormkit, until you receive* your warrior name, you will be known as Stormpaw. As you proceed to learn the ways of a warrior, you will be mentored by Thornclaw. Thornclaw, this will be your first apprentice, and I'm sure that you will pass your passion and devotion to the clan on to Stormpaw. You are young, but have much to show for your brief time as a warrior." Thornclaw stepped forward, dipped his head at Bluestar and turned to Stormpaw, touching noses with the new apprentice, who couldn't stop shivering with excitement.
The two moved back into the crowd of cats.
"Featherkit, come forth" Bluestar beckoned.
"Until you re-" She was cut off by Featherkit mumbling something inaudible. "What was that Featherkit?" Bluestar inquired, her head tipped to one side.
Pausing, Featherkit stood there awkwardly.
What are you doing, Featherkit? Fireheart thought, a worm of worry writhing as he watched his daughter standing in the middle of the camp, under the scrutiny of the entire clan.
Without thinking, Fireheart darted forward, pressing himself against her comfortingly.
"What's wrong, my kit?" He asked, watching her fidget, and after what felt like a moon, she opened her mouth tentatively.
"I.. don't wanna be a... warrior anymore." She mumbled louder this time, her head facing the floor, her paws working into the ground nervously.
Everyone was silent for a moment, as the leader and the kit faced each other for a second
Bluestar seemed to snap out of her own head after a second.
"Well, this is quite the development. Then what is it that you want?"
"I don't want to hurt anyone. I wanna help them. I really wanna be a medicine cat. I-Is that bad?" She stuttered nervously, looking up at Fireheart nervously. Firehearts mind went into a frenzy. *Did she? I never saw that side of her.* Fireheart thought to himself, and watched on silently, ensuring that every look he sent Featherkit held nothing but all the love and pride in the world whenever she'd glance up at

him. His daughter was going to be a medicine cat.
"No. No not all. This is wonderful news. You are so very special, Featherkit." Bluestar mewed and the air around changed and everyone's eyes seemed to brighten, along with Featherkit, who was suddenly gleaming, a smile edging at the corners of her face.
To this, Fireheart stepped back into the crowd. She didn't need any more comfort.
"Very well. Featherkit, are you sure that this is what you want? If you were to change your mind in the future, you would need to redo your training." She warned.
Just then, Yellowfang loudly barged her way into the circle in the clearing,
"I, too, cannot stress it enough. The life of a medicine cat is a big commitment. You're not only to become a healer but you are also barred from having a mate and kits." the raggedy medicine cat urged with a strained huff. "As a medicine cat, your clan are your children to care for until the day you pass to StarClan. Furthermore, you will become a herald of our warrior ancestors to ThunderClan. Are you willing to assume that kind of responsibility?" She questioned in a harsh, serious tone.
Featherkit dipped her head in thought, clearly thinking it through more thoroughly than before.
"Yes. I do want to be a medicine cat, Yellowfang, and I wanna learn everything you know and help the clan the way you do." She beamed at the snaggletoothed medicine cat, "And I don't need kits if I have a whole clan of kits who are always getting themselves hurt to keep me busy." she tacked on cheekily, earning her a hearty chuckle from the gathered crowd.
"Your sharp tongue will fit right in. Very well, we will then hold your ceremony at the half-moon medicine cat gathering. I am very proud to have you join the medicine cat ranks as a healer and have another pair of paws geared toward peace and protection for those unable to help themselves. Recognise now that the work of a healer contains no borders. Every cat, no matter their clan, is a patient before an enemy." She paused. "Featherkit, you will be known as Featherpaw from this point on, and you shall sleep in the apprentice's den with your brother, however, your training will not commence until you've visited the moonstone and are officially received by StarClan as a medicine cat apprentice." She finished.
I always thought she wanted to be a warrior. She never said anything

about wanting to be a medicine cat. Fireheart thought to himself. *Well nonetheless, I'm so proud of her. And of Stormpaw. They will grow to be assets to the clan.*
"Never saw that one coming", Goldenflower mewed. Snowkit was at her side, staring at Fireheart's kits with love shining in his eyes. Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw had also graduated from the nursery recently, leaving the queen with Speckletail's kit. Fireheart's pelt still pricked when he thought about it.
"Well, I can't say I'm not excited to see how Featherpaw fares as a healer. I truly never thought she was interested in it." He meowed.
"You never do. They always find a way to surprise you."
Goldenflower purred. Fireheart sat up.
"Well, I guess my time at the nursery has come to a close. I'll miss the warmth, but I really wanna get out and go hunting and patrolling again. I've missed stretching my legs and I wanna show off that I didn't slack off while here. Tigerclaw has been such a big help. I can't wait to catch Darkflower on our side of the scent line. We all know they'll try." He meowed, leaning into a massive stretch.
"Oh yeah, I forgot you were doing that. Though now that I look, I can see the result. You got muscle under that nursery fluff."
She mewed, laughing a little, looking him up and down.
"Thank you for all of your help, Goldenflower." he mewed, brushing affectionately against her flank. " Well, I suppose I'd better go and congratulate my kits." He mewed and trotted into the centre of the hollow, where everyone was situated, talking about the new apprentices and the surprise medicine cat.
"Fireheart!" He heard Stormpaw before he saw him and was surprised by a pair of thorn-sharp claws digging into his back. *Ow ow ow ow!* He screeched to himself, turning to his son with nothing but love, hiding that all he wanted to do right now was cuff him behind the ear.
"I'm gonna be a warrior!" He squealed hopping up and down in circles, excitedly. He spun around, bucking in a way that made Fireheart struggle to hold his irritation. After a little bit, he pulled him off and faced him, his face filled with joy.
"Yes, you are. And I'm so proud of you. Listen to Thornclaw and don't give him too much trouble okay?" He mewed, chuckling under his breath, as Stormpaw bounded away in Thornclaw's direction. He couldn't sit still for two seconds. Nothing new there.
Fireheart scanned the clearing for Featherpaw, spotting her talking

to Cinderpaw, and trotted off in that direction.
"Featherpaw" he mewed, but before he could reach her, he spotted a guilty look on her face. "What's wrong?" He mewed, and she lifted her head sadly.
"I'm sorry for not becoming a warrior. You were so proud when we said we wanted to be warriors that I didn't want to say anything. I just don't want to fight, and I really like-" he cut her off by pressing himself against her.
"You must not dare to apologise for that. I am so proud of you, and I know you'll make a great medicine cat. You even made Yellowfang smile with that little display. I think she likes you a lot." He mewed. She turned to look up at him.
"Really?" She asked.
"Really" he reassured her, licking her forehead, and wrapping his tail around her.
"Thanks, Fireheart" she whispered.
"You've raised a sterling young she-cat. She'll make a very attentive apprentice." Yellowfang interrupted, appearing behind them, "so long as she doesn't take after you." she jabbed, a humorous purr rumbling in her throat, eying Fireheart knowingly.
"Thanks, Yellowfa– Wait, was Fireheart a naughty apprentice?" Featherpaw mewed with a giggle. Fireheart shot warning daggers at her, and she responded in kind with a challenge before glancing sweetly back down at her new apprentice.

"Oh, absolutely! I'll tell you all about it." she mewed, the spring never leaving her voice, but then she glanced back at him with affection for a moment, "But, he's also the only reason I'm standing here today. Did you know that he saved my life? Featherpaw, if you grow up to be half the cat your parents are, then I think I might be in for an early retirement." she purred, and he smiled sheepishly at her before turning away to find Graystripe. Even now, her praise sent chills up his spine.

There he was, his grey pelt standing out from all the tabby and yellow and brown.
He waved his tail at him and came bounding over.
"Well done, Mother of the Moon. I think you raised some pretty impressive kits." He remarked, twining himself around him.
"And so did you, father of the moon."

"Yes, but 'Mother of the Moon' has a cooler ring to it. Besides, being in the nursery for six moons was not something I think I could've done." He purred with a cheeky chuckle.
"Well, they *were* a pretty comfortable six moons" Fireheart chuckled.
"yeah, I suppose... I'm glad to finally be allowed to sleep with my mate again. I've missed you a lot, believe it or not." He meowed sarcastically
"You know, maybe *you* should be the clan comedy cat, I'm sure you'd be an absolute hit." He mewed at Graystripe.
"Really? You think so?" He asked, his head tipped.
"Yeah, a swing over the head with a massive stick." He laughed, leaving Graystripe in a mock frown, before weaving himself around him affectionately, licking the top of his head.

He never thought he'd be so proud to watch his kits go off into their own lives. *Silverstream. Are you up there? Did I do it right?* He thought to himself, staring up at the blue sky, misty with the chill of leaf-bare. *I raised them to be accepted as assets to the clan. Not a single comment about a supposed non-clan cat wanting to be a medicine cat. They're loved by all. Just like you wanted.*
And now they're off to prove themselves as loyal members of ThunderClan. The prophecy could wait its turn. This was their moment.

END OF BOOK

Authors note:
Hey everybody. Thanks for reading this book of Warrior's fanon. It was a lot of fun. I do not have any plans to continue this series in the foreseeable future. My attempts to draw up a plan for the story sequence in the past have sort of gone off the rails. I probably COULD produce something serviceable nowadays, but I simply do not have the time (or frankly the motivation) right now. I think I am satisfied that I created a nice story that you could enjoy, even if only briefly.

If anyone wants a sequel to this, you are welcome to continue writing it and post it to your account. Just link it back to this story if you do. Y'know, artist's credit and all that.

Thanks for reading, and I will see you on the other side of yonder.

Mini-Stories

Hi there. Upon rereading and making some adjustments to the tone and syntax of the story (out of impulse), I've grown fond of it once again, and so I've decided to create this little mini-chapter post-story series. These will detail little scenarios that would have taken place throughout the chronology of the story but were cut because they didn't drive the plot forward. These are just little stories I would like to tell since I don't have to worry about them operating as needless fillers for the story.

I am well aware that the logical thing to do (and what people want me to do) with this drive to write is to continue writing the story since the end of this book is absolutely not conclusive to the story I originally wanted to tell. The irony is not lost on me. I just... don't want to, right now. Who knows, though? If I'm finding myself coming back to this story after all this time, maybe anything is possible.

The story will still be marked as incomplete since these chapters play no role in the plot development but are still considered canon to the world. As of now, though the book will be subject to 'irregular' development all the same.

Mini-Story 1: Kitty-got-Greencough

[image]

Chronology: Unimportant (pre-leaf-fall)

Main characters: Fireheart; Yellowfang; Sandstorm; Stormkit; Graystripe.

Chapter Cover Art:
Fireheart and Stormkit

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With leaf-fall around the corner, Fireheart felt his paw pads grow stiff and tight. He watched his breath forming into thin wispy clouds with every exhalation. He glanced down at the warm lumps of fur beside him, their breaths slow and strong. *There, there, kits. Keep at it. Leafbare will be over before you know it.* He swivelled his head to stare out at the rapidly-fading fire-orange sky as the sun disappeared somewhere beyond the ravine.

He began lapping at his tail, teasing at a clump of knots that wove themselves out of neglect. Fireheart dedicated more time to cleaning the kits than he did himself, and it was starting to show. He needed to start taking better care of himself. For that matter, his children needed to learn to clean themselves properly. Self-care and cleanliness were the absolute minimum expected of a clan cat. The fiery tom was well-aware that he should take care not to coddle them, but Graystripe was insistent that they give them at least until they were 4 moons old to rely on their parents. *Easy for that furball to say.* He wasn't the one pawed with the job.

He gave up teasing and began gnawing. If it refused to conform, he'd rip it out. As he began biting down, he heard a *meep* come from Stormkit. *Oh StarClan, I must've pulled at your fur.* "Sorry, baby. I didn't mean to nip you." He whispered. But after a moment of pause

to assess what possible strands he could've accidentally nabbed, it came again, "*meep...*" the kit breathed lightly. Fireheart got closer, looking the kit up and down. He narrowed his eyes.

He certainly didn't cause *that.*
What could possibly be tugging at- he paused in thought as his gaze passed over the kit's tiny chest, rising and falling in quiet, shallow huffs. That wasn't right. He realized with a start that it hadn't been his strong breaths he'd been listening to, but Featherkit's. Stormkit's breaths were just so weak that he never noticed how erratic they were. His eyes darted left and right in a panic, falling to the golden queen in the corner of the den.
Goldenflower will know what to do. "Goldenflower!" He hissed under his breath. "Goldenflower!" He repeated. After the second, the queen's eyes broke open with a yawn and a couple of tired blinks. "What is it, Fireheart? Can't it wait until dawn?" She murmured through drowsy laps at her pelt.
"I think something's wrong with Stormkit." he persisted, alarmed. "His breathing is so... shallow." he fumbled. Goldenflower's eyes jolted a bit and she slunk silently across the den to his nest. She leaned down, ear to the kit's chest, before bolting up, wide-eyed. "Take him to Yellowfang immediately." She urged. He was stunned for a moment before a sharp nudge from the queen got him sloppily to his paws. He picked up Stormkit, careful not to disturb his sister and darted across the camp, the bundle whining weakly in his maw, not batting miserably like his usual self. Something was seriously wrong. Visions flashed through his mind. He'd shake one, and another would pop up.
He crashed through the medicine den, head darting all over, "Ywowfwng!" he called through muffled jaws. Say her name and she shall appear.
"What is it, Fireheart? Can't it wait until dawn?" She muttered, wiping her eyes, which broke into wakefulness when she keyed in on the kit dangling limply from his jaws. "Put him down here." She commanded, gesturing at a patch of moss bedding. Fireheart placed him gently down and Yellowfang turned to him "speak, mousebrain!" she yowled. His mind was icy and brittle, like the sheets of frost covering the rocks outside the camp.
"Um-uh, so his- his breathing.. and- and he's not moving much... and mewling and" he rattled off whatever came to mind. She

clapped a paw on his muzzle.
"That's all I need." She meowed, getting to work, ear to his chest, nose to his mouth, and prodding. It felt like moons watching her inspect, poke, prod, and all he could do was sit and watch. After a moment, she sat back and looked at him. It felt like a season had passed by the time she looked up. "He has greencough." She meowed grimly. "He'll have to stay here for the night so I can observe him." She huffed. The fiery tom stared blankly at the medicine den wall, then stood up and paced the den entrance, dazed. He was stunned by Yellowfang's words. Moreso, though, her composure.
"Yellowfang. How do you seem so... calm?" He hazarded. The medicine cat didn't turn around, but sighed and kept working. "How are you not panicking as well!?" He mewled. He knew immediately that Yellowfang was not the real target of his frustration, but he had to get it out. The panic rising in his chest was so heavy that it had nowhere to go. She whipped around, glaring at him.
"Of course, I'm panicking! On the inside. But outbursts won't change anything, will they? Fireheart, breathe." she scolded him like a kit but dropped her tail to his shoulder comfortingly before continuing, "You are the closest thing I have to a son that I can be proud of. I am certainly a medicine cat, but I love this kit like it were my kin. I promise you, Fireheart-" She murmured impatiently, sparing a glance at Stormkit's tiny frame as he squirmed, "-I care very much so. That is why I don't want to waste time chittering like songbirds when I should be working. Like the time I'm wasting right now!" She huffed, turning around and getting back to work.
Fireheart had no words. So much meaning was exchanged in so few words, but he hadn't the mental energy to unpack it at all. There was no comfort to be found in her words – not unless they resulted in the survival of his son. Not when he might lose a kit to his inattentiveness. He scraped across his mind, mentally rifling through his memory. How could he not have noticed that Stormkit was so ill? Such severe symptoms don't just appear from nowhere, right? *How could I have missed this? Surely, there were no signs, right?* Right from dawn, they were all playing moss ball together. Featherkit, Tawnykit, Bramblekit... Stormkit... didn't play. He finally recalled. Stormkit lay in the nest, complaining that he was too tired.

Fireheart stepped out of the medicine den, his tail following limply behind, leaving trails in the sand as he moved. *There were signs. I just didn't see them. No, I didn't look for them.* His one job was to be attentive. It was the entire purpose for which queens were exempt from warrior duties. *I had one task and I failed miserably.* He felt his whole body quivering. Every step was a heaving effort to stay steady. Finally, the frustration had built to a point where he couldn't ignore it. He tipped his head up to silverpelt, teeth clenched in rage.

"*RRGH! I hate me! I hate me so much!*" He opened his jaws to yowl at the moon. He felt angry, but the voice that played back in his ears was barely a whimper, drowning in a new type of guilt he wasn't accustomed to. Toppling to the ground, he dug his claws into his scalp, cursing himself, staring aimlessly up and down the camp. *Any good parent would've... A good parent could've- I should've...* He inwardly mewled when all he wanted to do was curse out StarClan for something they had no control over.

There he sat, pawing blindly at the sand in the middle of the clearing, clenching his jaws and scraping at the ground. His explosive pain had given way to a dull burn deep in his chest, periodically building to gasp. He was so lost in thought that he jumped at a tail brushing against his flank. He turned with a start to see Sandstorm standing a mouse-length from him.
"Hey, you okay? Kinda late to be basking" She chuckled at her own joke but tipped her head in concern when he didn't respond, "what's up?"
He couldn't say anything, else he break down and lose it again. He just glanced toward the medicine den, and Sandstorm tracked his gaze to a moonlit Yellowfang funnelling herbs he couldn't even identify into his kit's mouth, who lay there without protest, or any sign that he was even awake.
"Oh... I'm sorry," she whispered and said nothing more, rather pressing herself against his flank. He deflated into her fur and pressed his face into the crook of her neck. He needed this. After a moment, she spoke, "he'll make it through. He's tough. And stubborn. Kinda like his dads." He huffed a *mrow* of affectionate laughter at that. Fireheart's chest ached like a branch was being driven against it with every breath he took. Sandstorm's company,

however, helped ease the pain, if only a little. They waited vigil, eyes never leaving the medicine den.

"It's my fault" he whispered after a short silence and she looked at him with compassionate eyes, "I should have seen that he wasn't being his usual self. I'm a horrible parent," he murmured. She butted him in his shoulder, her gaze now stern.

"You are not, and it is not your fault. Kits are crazy things. There's no way you could've known that something like this would happen. You are a wonderful parent, and I never want to hear you say anything to the contrary." she hissed. He said nothing, just looked back toward the medicine den.

The two just sat as the night went on, and moon shadows cast by the branches of the trees above passed over the camp.

Every motion or face Yellowfang made, he couldn't help but analyze it to find meaning in it, reservation, jubilation, anything... even defeat. But nothing. She was as stoic as ever.

Blinking out of his daze, he noticed that he was rocking back and forth. It was Sandstorm. He wasn't sure when she started, but it was making him tired. "Sandstorm..." he mumbled. She rested her tail over his.
"Shhh. Just rest. You need it. I'm right here. I'll wake you if anything happens." she cooed. He didn't protest. The night had taken its toll and exhausted him. Yellowfang was right about one thing. Staring across the camp at her as she worked, he felt like her helpless kit – staring up at his mother, hoping she would use her magical motherly powers to make everything okay like she always did. He silently nodded his thanks and curled up next to his friend — still in the middle of the clearing, under the bright light of the moon — and closed his eyes. A wave of weight and darkness washed over him.

A moment seemed to pass before he felt a nudging in his side, bringing him back to reality. "Wake up, Yellowfang's asking for you." He recognized Sandstorm's voice. She really did stay by him the whole night. When he opened his eyes, the early morning sun rays were diffusing off the stone in the ravine and distant birdsong

could be heard from the forest. The first patrol had just risen and was stepping out of the warrior's den. He shook his head and gave Sandstorm a grateful lick on the nose before hobbling over to the medicine den. He could see Graystripe sitting beside Yellowfang, lapping at the pile of grey fur.

He joined with the two and stared down at his precious son, who was laying there, unmoving. His vision was too bleary to make out details so he turned to Yellowfang.
"How is he?" He mewed, fearing the answer. After a moment, she sat straight up with a satisfied look on her face.
"Stable for now. His breathing is far better, but his body is exhausted. The treatment is putting him through it. I gave him a piece of poppy seed, so don't expect him to be jumping around. He desperately needs to rest." Fireheart rested his head against Graystripe's shoulder, who, after a moment, turned his head and rested his muzzle atop his orange mate's head.
"I'm so sorry you had to sit through all this alone. I should've been there. I should've heard you. I'm so sorry." He mumbled, guilt wracking the grey warrior's voice.
"No, it's not your fault, you couldn't have known. Besides, I wasn't alone, Sandstorm was with me the whole time." He sighed, letting his mate take hold of his weight, relaxing his smaller frame into his Graystripe's larger, fluffy body. *Didn't Sandstorm say something similar?* The words went through his mind but he was too tired to dwell on it.
He stole a look outside the den and cats passed by, glancing in with worried, pitying expressions. Fireheart hated pity. *But what would I do if I saw two parents standing over the body of their dying kit?* He decided to let it go. It wasn't about him or Graystripe. It was about their baby to whom, if he joined StarClan right now, they wouldn't even get to say goodbye. Fireheart banished the thought immediately.

The two lay at the entrance. Fireheart had his chin resting atop Graystripe's paws, and the grey warrior let his head fall across his fiery back, periodically lifting it to sneak a glance at Stormkit. They wordlessly watched their kit's chest, praying that each time it fell, it would rise again, and each time it did. Fireheart could barely keep his eyes open but would have a near-meltdown at every moment

Stormkit's breathing slowed down or sped up a little too much. Yellowfang was visibly annoyed, but the look in her eyes told him that the last thing on her mind was chasing them out. There was nothing more exhausting than sitting and waiting, unable to do anything. He watched his child shivering, flinching and shuffling, as if fighting a battle in his sleep. *You have your own battle to win now, my baby.* His breath hitched in his chest thinking imagining what Stormkit was feeling now. Did he feel alone? Did he know they were there with him?

"How's Featherkit?" Fireheart mumbled, almost subconsciously as he faded in and out of rest.
"She's playing with the others. Thornpaw's giving out free badger rides as we speak." He heard Graystripe mumble, a weak tint of humour lining his voice. He turned his head slightly, batting a single eye open against Graystripe's shoulder and spotted Featherkit screeching with joy, struggling to keep a hold of the apprentice as he barreled through the camp.
"Good. I don't want her thinking anything is wrong" He smiled, then frowned "... Stormkit would've loved that." He turned his gaze back to his son, who finally settled down, breathing coming in deeper gasps, but gasps nonetheless. *My precious kit. Do you even know what's happening right now? Or are you blissfully unaware?* He hoped Stormkit was lost somewhere in a good dream that just went on and on.
Finally, after what felt like moons, he worked up the courage to do what he'd been so afraid of. He leaned down and touched his muzzle to his son's forehead, drinking in his dewy scent, before pulling back ever so slowly. Fireheart knew the smell of death. He'd become well-acquainted with it during his time in the forest. He detected no such scent on his kit. Relief slammed through his body, leaving him dizzy. His child had a chance. With that knowledge, he turned to Graystripe. "Can you please watch him? I *desperately* need to get a little bit of proper sleep." He felt nothing but guilt for abandoning his kit, but he knew he wasn't helping anything sitting there half asleep and in hysterics. If anything, he was making things worse. He appreciated Sandstorm's sitting with him, but the half-sleep he got in the middle of the freezing clearing of the hollow did precious little for his mind. Graystripe put his nose to Fireheart's, "Of course. I'll wake you if anything happens at all." He promised.

Fireheart blinked his gratitude and hobbled toward the nursery, swaying unsteadily as he moved. He was moments away from falling over halfway across the clearing, having nearly tripped over his own paws when a cat he never checked to identify stepped to his side and guided him back to his nest. He just absent-mindedly whispered his thanks and flopped down.
As soon as he pressed his head to the moss, sleep violently overtook him, throwing his mind underwater.

The flame-pelted warrior reflexively scrunched his eyes and swatted at a cold nose pressing against his face, pulling him from the void of dreamless sleep. The nose persisted, drawing back his senses. He opened his eyes and was met with immediate regret as the setting sun bleared directly into his face,

"What is it?" he mumbled through his paws that shielded his face from the light.

"Stormkit is awake" he heard Dustpelt's meow, and his mind turned back on. He jumped up, surveying his surroundings and made a dash for the medicine den. A mix of anxiety and relief flowed through him as he approached the entrance to the den and ducked under the entranceway. When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw Graystripe crouched over their kit, whose eyes were now open, head lifted from his nest, nuzzling him gently. Fireheart dived in beside him and pressed his cheek against the side of his head,

"My precious kit! I was worried sick! How are you feeling? Has he eaten something? Are you hungry, dear?" he cooed, launching rapid-fire questions and exclamations around, enveloping Stormkit with his body. The kit buried himself into Fireheart's chest.

"Mama, my head and my everything hurt. Why is it so sore?" he whimpered into his fiery fur.

"I know, my kit. I know it does. You're so strong and brave, and I love you so much. Just hang in there. You'll feel better in no time." he mewed, lapping at his kit's face and ears.

"Okay, mama." he mewed weakly and didn't pull away from the laps, just lay there and accepted it, head bobbing back and forth as Fireheart's tongue dragged at his fur. In between rasping laps of his tongue, Fireheart couldn't keep from meowing and affirming,

"I promise. I promise I promise I'll always be here to wash you feed you and love you. You never have to wash yourself ever because I'm here. Just don't ever leave me." he mewled into his son's fur, soaking it as he began to wash him from ear to tail tip. He paused, glancing up from the corner of his eye at Graystripe, who shot him a knowing glance. *Yeah yeah, I know what I said. Hold your tongue if you want to keep it.* He thought, shooting back a look that conveyed just that, and the grey warrior responded with a sheepish nod.

After a thorough cleaning, Stormkit was finally deciding to pull away and Fireheart let him. He'd never been happier to have his kit try to escape a cleaning. Anything that showed he had the energy left in him. The kit settled between Fireheart's forepaws, closed his eyes and fell asleep as the orange tom continued to endlessly dote on him, nuzzling and hushing and whispering 'I love you's to him. Yellowfang padded up beside them.

"He'll be fine. The worst is over. Now he just needs plenty of rest, fresh-kill and to stay warm. I trust you can cover two of those, no?" She meowed. Fireheart nodded affirmation, looking gratefully up at the grouchy medicine cat.

Next thing, he heard a mew coming from outside the medicine cat den. He looked out to see Featherkit standing there, confused. "Why are you all in the medicine den?" she asked. Fireheart sniffed. *You really had no idea all this time.* He laughed inwardly, though, he wanted to cry and yowl and screech from the emotional overflow. He noticed Graystripe take a glance in his direction and blink understandingly, brushing against him and stepping forward. "Your brother's just a bit sick. He needs to stay here and rest for a while." Graystripe called back and padded over to her. After an inaudible conversation, the two scampered off to wherever it is those hooligans go when left unattended. Fireheart was perfectly content right where he was. He would not leave the medicine den until Stormkit could leave with him.

Four days had gone by, and Fireheart woke to excited giggling and a suspiciously familiar set of paws scrambling up and down his side. Paws that he had not felt in quite some time. Smirking, he peaked open one of his eyes.
"Now, just who could be jumping on me?" He rumbled with a purr.
"Fireheart! Fireheart!" He heard the excited squeaks of his baby boy that he'd missed so much.
"Oh, it's you! You scamp!" he growled and jumped up, sending him flying and chasing him around the nest. "The mighty hunter is back on his paws. Looks like it's time to show him what a real hunt looks like." he hissed, stalking toward his kit, who squealed and tipped himself over with laughter. "I have you now, little hunter. Prepare to-" he was cut off by a cat clearing her throat. He turned to see Yellowfang standing at the medicine den entrance, looking mildly annoyed.
"If you are well enough to be running around, then you are well enough to take it outside and stop bothering me" She huffed.
Fireheart laughed sheepishly.
"I suppose. Sorry, Yellowfang." He mewed.
"Sorry, Yellowfang" He turned to see Stormkit follow suit with the apology, dipping his deep grey head in her direction. Fireheart couldn't help but feel proud.
When they turned to leave, Fireheart ushered Stormkit out of the den and the kit scampered off toward the nursery. The fiery warrior turned back to the medicine cat.
"Thank you for all you did... it means a lot." He mewed sincerely, and Yellowfang rolled her eyes,
"Bahh..." She just grumbled. Fireheart stepped forward and pressed his cheek to hers.
"I mean it. Thank you. You are the best grandmother my kits could have ever asked for." He cooed before breaking away from the contact. The old medicine cat was scowling in annoyance, but her eyes were glittering through her furrowed brow and a purr escaped before she could cut it off.
"Well, go on then! Stop wasting my time. You're quickly becoming my *least* favourite kit." She grumbled. He smiled and turned toward the clearing, where Stormkit and Featherkit were chasing down a Graystripe-badger.
"Go for his legs!" He yelled out, falling in line with the two furballs. "He can't get away if he can't run!"

END

A/N

Well, that was fun. And heart-wrenching. Took a little while, but I think that it turned out alright. Please let me know if you wanna see more. I'm sure Fireheart has a few more stories from within the series that he'd like to tell. They aren't all quite as long as this, but if you're interested, or just as hopelessly addicted to the cuteness as I am, let me know.

Other than that:
Hi! Have a pleasant day, and bye!